

Preface

I have a vivid memory of a chance encounter with a maintenance worker on a high school campus who was chest-deep in a hole where complicated plumbing valves had been uncovered. He was reading intently from a ponderous technical manual he had spread out on the ground in front of him. I've often thought about him over these many years working with a wide variety of entities in the area of organizational development, problem solving, conflict, and change. When we have a thorny mechanical problem to address, we're very comfortable dragging out the manual and figuring out a way to fix things to make them run better. But when we have a sticky organizational or interpersonal problem on our hands, there are few manuals to open or technical support lines to call that give us a handle on how to proceed to make things right.

This book is intended to be such a resource. While I wouldn't advise waiting until a meeting or relationship is raging out of control before opening these pages, they are intended to give individuals and groups support in the process of aligning themselves to work together more effectively to solve problems and address conflict. It includes an inquiry-oriented focus that, when done well, will lead the problem solvers to learn and discover together. This project includes at its core a fundamental belief that anyone in the workplace can and should develop attitudes and skills that will align the organization around learning, which will lead to results that are more productive and satisfying. For this reason, when I refer to a *leader* in the pages that follow, I am thinking not of the head of an organization, department, family, or team, but anyone with the motivation, honesty, and courage to describe, without blame, the problems or situations that need to be changed and to put in motion a search for better ways of doing things. The book is designed to support that process, and this preface is intended to help readers navigate these pages well according to their own learning style.

x Leading Through Collaboration

Much of the experience and passion that I bring to my work with public and nonprofit organizations is reflected in these pages. The creation of *coherence* is by nature a community-building process, which is the very essence of the work done by leaders in schools, cities, counties, and other local governmental entities whose mission it is to deliver excellent services for the public good, whether it is education, public safety, community planning and development, recreation, sewage treatment and disposal, or water. It seems only reasonable that we would attempt to provide those services in a way that creates community in the process. I also hope it will be apparent that creating community is a critical byproduct in any kind of organization in which the key stakeholders expect to have strong relationships with colleagues, bosses, subordinates, customers, neighbors, family members, and even pets. If we can “tune in” to aligning principles, we can harness energies for continually producing agreements that we otherwise might only manage to randomly achieve by luck.

When I began this book, I was working as a consultant and an associate professor of Organizational Leadership. While still in the middle of writing, I assumed the role of superintendent of the Napa Valley Unified School District. So I bring the dual perspectives of support provider and practitioner to these pages, and I draw on examples from each to illustrate these tools and attitudes. I offer them here not as the final answer in how things should be done, but rather as a work very much in progress that represents opportunities for learning that are at the heart of this work.

After many years exploring the potential of leadership through collaboration, I have learned that there are some attitudes that differ from the way most of us have learned to respond to problems and conflict in our lives and in the workplace. In fact, there are some powerful and subtle principles at work in the world that can give us an edge as we work with others to get better results when we address the thorniest problems. Understanding these principles will increase the likelihood that the skills that follow can be applied successfully over time. For this reason, the reader is encouraged to read Part I carefully, for it describes the attitudes that can ensure more successful collaborations. These chapters provide a framework for understanding the personal learning that is a necessary part of this process and they describe how to equip oneself with the attitudes that make generative engagement with others possible.

Readers who by nature want to try a new appliance before reading the instructions may be tempted to go straight to Part II. The chapters in this section are intended to provide a basic set of practical problem solving skills that can make collaboration a reality for users with hands-on problems. This portion can be used as a field guide to provide approaches for organizing people to move through a problem more expediently, as well as ideas for how to work with a team to expand the capacity of its members to collaborate to produce better agreements and to respond proactively to the stressors of conflict and change. If the tools in Part II offer some transitional improvement to the way we approach conflict, the attitudes in Part I include a potential for transformational change that can alter the way we interact with one another.

The index and the sidebars have been designed to cross-reference tools and applications in areas of particular interest and to make it easier for a reader to navigate freely throughout the book.

Taken as a whole, this book is intended to present the rationale for why collaboration taps into powerful forces that can make the world a better place, as well as to provide ample knowledge and practical skills to empower those who want to try.