

Our lived experience today tells us that to survive and thrive as an organization, community, diocese, we need to foster an environment of collaboration. We live in a complex world where no one person can know it all; we need each other and we need to learn together continually. Medical group practices, treatment teams, strategic planning groups and leadership teams are a few examples of the shift being made today to help everyone work together to meet a group's mission.

“Collaboration is a process through which people who see different aspects of a problem/issue can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (Gray,1989). Collaboration involves attitudes, skills and practices that are, however, rarely taught. With our love of technology, we have a tendency to go for the quick fix by utilizing computers and software as a means of creating collaboration. The reality today is that for any group to be effective and innovative in mission, individuals need to become more skillful co-laborers and, when appropriate, make use of technology to help create collaborative environments.

Fostering certain attitudes, especially humility and vulnerability, help build collaborative relating. When persons recognize that they are not all knowing, they see life as a journey of continued learning and integration in which others are essential. Individuals experience the richness of involvement and being vulnerable as they expose what they know and do not know. Trusting one another enables the vulnerability essential for co-laboring.

In addition to these attitudes, Peter Senge and his associates, as described in *The Fifth Discipline*, recognize the importance of developing co-laboring skills. Advocacy and inquiry are two skills essential in creating collaborative environments. It is not enough to have learned these two skills. To be successful in co-laboring, individuals must know how to **balance** presenting one's views (**advocacy**) and how to search out the perspectives and knowledge of others (**inquiry**). For example, when there are differing perspectives in a community on how to proceed with decisions about the use of property or a building, it is important for each person/group to state clearly their position, including their underlying reasons and feelings. In addition, when

each person/group actively seeks to understand what others are thinking and feeling, more information is available to all involved, and underlying feelings (e.g., fear or sadness), often hidden motivators, are also able to be addressed.

Many of us have learned how to express our perspectives, to **advocate**. Some have been especially encouraged to present and argue strongly for their views, while others have more likely been encouraged to inquire. Each person has learned a natural tendency toward either advocacy or inquiry. Helpful advocacy is not simply expressing what you think. It also includes making your thinking process visible by sharing your assumptions and making explicit your reasoning and your feelings. Although individuals are more vulnerable when their underlying thinking and feelings are “exposed,” they help advance everyone's learning when they provide more information about how they have come to their conclusions. Advocacy is dysfunctional when someone states his or her perspective and then refuses to assist others to understand this perspective.

**Inquiry** happens when we seek to understand another person's perspective, by asking them to “share with us how you see it.” Inquiry is also practiced when we ask others to explore and test our perspective, assumptions and data. The latter requires the ability to hold loosely one's cherished opinions and perspectives, trusting that more creative and insightful perspectives will emerge by working together. Inquiry is dysfunctional when there is relentless interrogating without caring for the person or when the questions become intrusive and invade another's personal privacy.

Organizational change and better relationships can be fostered by a commitment to collaboration through balancing both advocacy and inquiry. These skills are particularly helpful when a group is considering complex questions/issues that require creative and even novel responses. Given the time and the world in which we live, can we afford *not* to learn how to be more collaborative, especially by balancing advocacy and inquiry?

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