



Newsletter  
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"Their (Common Ground's) skills in bringing together individuals with diverse backgrounds and levels of experience have been invaluable. They have helped us to clarify expectations, form working agreements, and overcome some barriers to positive interpersonal relationships."

*Jonathan Bowman, MD, Medical Director,*

## COMMON GROUND CONCILIATION SERVICES



Photo by Katherine Jones

*Strengthening Organizations,  
Enhancing Communications*

### WORKING THROUGH MORALLY OR SPIRITUALLY BASED DISPUTES

*By Bob Rainville, CPM*

Some of the most bitter and difficult disputes we encounter within our families, organizations, and communities are those arising from personal moral values and spiritual beliefs. When people are engaged in disputes based upon moral values and spiritual beliefs, their personal self-image and group identity are at stake. Compromising with advocates of conflicting beliefs can be considered as a sign of moral weakness. Attempting to resolve the issue through voting will frequently only heighten the conflict. While many disputes can be resolved through agreements to share resources, clarify roles, or modify behaviors, these solutions will not resolve moral or spiritual conflicts. Conflicts associated with same sex marriage, doctor-assisted suicide, development of natural spaces, abortion, and balancing family/work responsibilities illustrate the divisiveness of morally or spiritually based disputes and the anguish and difficulty our communities, organizations, churches, and families face when confronted with these issues. Last November at the Annual Conference of the Oregon Mediation Association, I heard an excellent presentation by Dr. Larry Susskind on morally or spiritually based conflicts. Dr. Susskind is a highly regarded author, instructor, and mediator who currently serves as a Ford Professor of Urban and



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"I really appreciated the personal approach of Bob and Larry, who personified the lessons they brought. The role plays were particularly effective to help us cement the techniques. The listening skills of the instructors also helped to bring out the collective wisdom of the group. It was a wonderful experience!"

*Richard*

"I liked very much the step by step approach to difficult conversations. Practicing as we went was helpful. Your ability to listen to our ideas, input, suggestions. It didn't feel like you were the 'authorities' and had all the 'answers'."

*Carol*

## About the

Environmental Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In his presentation, Dr. Susskind shared practical insights he has acquired when attempting to build dialogue between parties divided by differences in moral or spiritual beliefs. When confronting morally or spiritually based conflicts, Dr. Susskind's ultimate goal is to establish peaceful coexistence among the parties. His goal is not to resolve the differences. He described three steps he uses in helping parties engaged in these disputes:

- His first step is to establish communication. This may not be easy. People are sometimes reluctant to even have discussions with people of divergent beliefs, fearing that their participation would jeopardize their moral standing and image within their group. These concerns are best addressed prior to scheduling joint party meetings through personal meetings with unbiased facilitators.
- His next step is to conduct joint meetings where conflicting parties can communicate safely. Generally, a skilled, unbiased facilitator is needed to guide the meeting and foster an open exchange of perspectives. The objective of these conversations is to help parties to begin to see each other as caring and reasonable people whose perspectives are embedded within deeply held moral values. Parties are not expected or encouraged to abandon their personal beliefs as a result of these conversations. Rather facilitated conversations can be an important first step in replacing stereotypes with respectful personal relationships.

A second benefit arising from these conversations is the realization that they share many of the same overarching values. While parties will continue to disagree on some points, often they will find many more points of strong agreement.

- The final step is to build on the discovery of shared values by exploring opportunities for cooperation in achieving common objectives. As an example, groups in conflict over abortion may be willing to work together to reduce the incidence of unwanted pregnancies. Although cooperation will not lead to agreement on moral or spiritual differences, joining together to achieve shared objectives will

## Authors



Larry Hauder MS, CPM

Larry has 13 years of mediation experience Significant experience with religious and neighborhood organizations, 15 years as a Pastor in the Mennonite Church, and is a past Board Member of Ten Thousand Villages, North End Neighborhood Assoc., Boise Ministry of Aged, and the Boise Ministerial Association.



Bob Rainville MS, CPM

Bob has 10 years of mediation experience, significant experience with governmental and nonprofit organizations, served as past President of the Eastern Oregon Mediation Association and Union County Oregon United Way, currently a member of Rotary

go a long way toward mitigating divisiveness, building relationships, and enhancing the potential for peaceful coexistence.

Conflicts rooted in moral or spiritual differences can be divisive and damaging to individual relationships and entire organizations. They are not likely to be resolved through votes or mediated agreements. However, peaceful coexistence is possible through facilitated conversations that help parties to build understanding, respect, and cooperation in pursuing shared objectives.

You can learn more about Dr. Susskind at <http://theconsensusbuildingapproach.blogspot.com>.

## ASSESSING THE NEED FOR OUTSIDE ASSISTANCE

*By Larry Hauder CPM*

Professional intervention is sometimes necessary to help organizations find opportunities for growth and innovation in conflict situations. A challenge faced by leaders is knowing when to request professional help from outside the organization. Waiting too long before seeking assistance is a common mistake. Getting help sooner rather than later is especially important when conflict may become so divisive and disruptive that a group's mission and ability to function is threatened.

A skilled, professional mediator/facilitator can be very helpful to leadership by offering alternatives for resolving a conflict situation. Often, simply the presence of a mediator/facilitator from outside the organization provides a welcomed break, which eases tensions and gives rise to opportunities to find creative alternatives.

When left unattended, conflict can grow and intensify quickly. Feelings heighten; positions harden; communication stops; dehumanizing emerges, and "punishing" becomes justified.

Here are some indicators that point to a need for professional assistance:

- Drop in productivity.
- Absence of joy in the work place.
- Increase in absenteeism.
- Perceptions of bias or taking sides directed at leadership by those involved in the conflict.
- Decrease in volunteerism and financial

International, Hospice, Big Brothers, and is past Planning Commissioner Kootenai County, Idaho.



We hope you enjoy this newsletter and find it helpful. If you have any questions or want to discuss something with us, please call!

**Sincerely,**

Larry Hauder  
Common Ground  
Conciliation Services

contributions.

- Emergence of subgroups and coalitions advocating for opposing positions.
- Existence of an elevated emotional pitch and edginess even during casual conversations.
- Dehumanizing of people supporting opposing positions.
- Name calling or labeling.
- Secrecy and non-disclosure of important information.
- Evidence of a lack of trust among members of the organization.

Professional mediators and facilitators can be of great help to organizational leaders because of their skills and unbiased status. Services provided by these professionals will vary depending upon the organization's needs, but may include:

- Assessments of the conflict depth. (Conflict severity will determine possible remedies to mitigate or resolve tensions.)
- Facilitation of constructive conversations between individuals where there is serious conflict. Often these conversations lead to enhanced understanding, discovery of alternative options for resolution, and adoption of enduring agreements.
- Coaching of leaders helping them to participate in the discussion of issues without being perceived as biased and unreceptive to other perspectives.
- Brainstorming of issue resolution strategies with leaders.
- Facilitation of small group meetings to resolve issues and/or enhance cooperation.
- Development of plans to foster reconciliation and healing within organizations.
- Presentation of workshops to equip members of organizations with skills needed to diffuse potential issues before they become difficult.

Despite their best intentions, all organizations are confronted with issues that can become divisive and damaging to their mission. Internal awareness and skill can resolve many issues before they become serious. Leaders who call for assistance when conflicts exceed internal resources can spare their organizations the impaired accomplishment and emotional pain associated with persistent, unresolved conflict.

## Our Mission

*The mission of Common Ground Conciliation Services, Inc. (Common Ground) is to strengthen community, nonprofit, faith-based and governmental organizations by providing affordable meeting facilitation, conflict mediation, communications workshops, and organizational consultation.*

*Our services enhance an organization's success by:*

- *building teamwork and commitment,*
- *facilitating the resolution of divisive issues,*
- *promoting efficiency and accountability in strategic planning,*
- *growing communication and conflict resolution skills of individual organization members.*

*Community leaders serve as Common Ground's board of directors and are actively involved in guiding the organization. Services are provided by committed professionals with many years of professional and volunteer experience working with community, non-profit, faith-based, and governmental organizations.*

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