

QUESTION-DRIVEN LEADERSHIP

audacious workgroup performance



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Case Study: A Community of Ranchers and Farmers Solve a High Stakes Crisis

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Situation: In order to acquire large tracts of prime land cheaply, a development company in Northwest Washington had been quietly seeking deals with the individual farmers and ranchers in a picturesque valley outside of Arlington, Washington. Seeing they were poised to lose not only a lot of money but to sacrifice stewardship of the land they loved, the owners had tried meeting several times for the purpose of protecting their investments. However, because of a long history of disputes over water rights, boundaries, easements and land use, they were wary of cooperating with one another, even with so much at stake. In the words of one rancher, “Our first several meetings were characterized by an unsettling degree of secrecy and distrust on the part of several of the landowners.”

Process: The owners came together for the purpose of protecting their investments and requested us to facilitate their last-ditch meeting. In the Lutheran Church community room, there were lots of homemade cookies, coffee, punch and an unavoidable atmosphere of tension. Our first piece of business, therefore, was to help them come up with a question which spoke to everyone’s interests, one question which would focus everyone’s attention on their common interests. The question they chose to focus on was, “How can we organize ourselves in a way that works for all of us?”

Everyone sharing the same, universally relevant question allowed them to relax old fears and set aside their narrower perspectives. In one, 3-hour gathering, they began to plan together for the future in a way they had never imagined was possible in the past, a way which ensured everyone was included. They appreciated the opportunity to set outside their personal concerns and join a cooperative effort in which they were all heard and made a difference and which benefited everyone.

Results: In the words of the new co-chairwoman, “Collective Intelligence Solutions, headed by Robert Bystrom, offered to help us achieve a cooperative spirit in our group. In only one meeting, using the [question-driven] exercises directed by Robert and his staff, we were able to ‘break the ice’ with all of the group members. Each member finally felt free to state clearly what he hoped to achieve with his property. The atmosphere was such that all members agreed to honor each landowner’s needs and desires throughout the process. It was the change we needed to break the trust barrier that we were faced with.

“We are very pleased with the results of this ‘workshop.’ The group was sufficiently cohesive thereafter not only to get all of our properties into the Urban Growth Area, but also to scare off the vulture developer.”

Four years later, they have a comprehensive plan of the valley showing possible development sites, which stipulates strict requirements and restrictions. A few homes have been built and development has been appreciatively slow.

Bonus result: The main outcome thus far has been the blossoming of a community which everyone owns and everyone can talk more openly about what is important. One of the ranchers noted that yes, they saved the valley, “but now I have a lot of new best friends and they happen to be my neighbors.”