

## Finding Common Ground

In just about every profession and area of life, we have to work and make decisions *collaboratively*. **We are in fact collaborating all the time** – at work, home, university or school, in our community, when volunteering – in fact any time we have to **get the support and agreement of others** before we can take action of some sort. Sometimes you may be in the position of making a unilateral decision but you could run into resistance or create ill will by forcing your own way or find others blocking the implementation of your solution. Other implications of acting unilaterally could include eroding support you would otherwise have if you choose to be more inclusive and collaborate. Alternatively, you may lack the knowledge or skills to solve a problem or make a decision alone and need cooperation with others to achieve your goals or make the best possible decision. The power of collaboration in achieving mutually shared visions and solving problems is a reality for all of us, but **one challenge is finding common ground**.

There are a number of different processes for finding common ground not only for those working together with a shared vision but for those in conflict situations. The critical intervention of a neutral third party (mediator) in a dispute will often make the difference to a successful outcome as **people in conflict often find it difficult to look for commonality**. They are often fearful they will lose face by agreeing with the other party and tend to focus on their own positions. Without help, they miss out on the opportunity to acknowledge others, validate statements they agree with and build upon issues of common interest, resulting in a successful outcome for all parties. However, one basis for common ground even in the most difficult conflict situation is that most **people have a basic need to be heard and understood** and given the chance to share their views, perhaps for the first time.



In situations where a group are collaboratively working together on a common goal or vision, but still have differences and obstacles to overcome during the process, they too can **build bridges**. The benefit of having a skilled facilitator present is they are trained to ‘pick up the clues’ in the conversations and often long before a group is aware they are in agreement on a particular issue, an astute facilitator will have noticed what is no longer being debated. The group can then be moved forward to discuss other issues they still disagree about, but with greater impetus after some common ground has been achieved in the process.

“Where do you find common ground? At the point of challenge.”

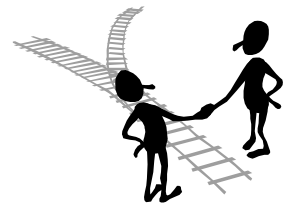
– Jesse Jackson

### 10 WAYS TO BUILD COMMON GROUND

1. **Set up a ‘climate of agreement’** – A neutral environment where you can meet that is conducive to positive conversations. All decision-makers or stakeholders should be present.

## Finding Common Ground (Cont'd)

2. **Identify common goals early on** – Decide what outcome you want. An agenda that clearly identifies common objectives is the starting point to the process of deciding *how* they will be achieved. *Think added value* – “How can I make a bigger pie?”
3. **Be open-minded to the process** – There is more than one path to resolution of a problem or conflict and certainly numerous creative ways to achieve shared visions when all input is considered non-judgmentally and with an open-minded attitude.
4. **Start with the end in mind** – If you are clear about *where* you want to end up (goal/agreement), *how* you get there (process) is more likely to be successful, despite differences and obstacles you experience along the way. **Focus on the outcome but be flexible about the route you take.**
5. **Separate the people from the problem** – when obstacles to your discussions arise, take a deep breath and focus on *resolving the issue*, not attacking the person.
6. **Improve your communication skills** – learn the basics of how to listen actively, be respectful, contribute relevant facts and build trust. Be prepared to listen to other peoples' perspectives, be curious about what *they* have to contribute and then share how it is for *you*.
7. **Develop 'possibility thinking'** – Robert H Schuller, author of “*Tough Times Never Last, but Tough People Do!*” advocates ‘Never reject an idea because it’s not your way of doing things ... it might fail ... your mind is made up ... you see something wrong with it ... you won’t get the credit or you don’t have the money, manpower, muscle or months to achieve it!’
8. **Listen for communication ‘clues’** – When other people stop arguing, debating or disagreeing, it is time to reframe what has been said to clarify if you can agree on the point being discussed.
9. **Make it easy to say ‘Yes’** – Put yourself in the other person’s shoes. Consider *their* options. Be patient while they present *their* ideas or perspectives. You’re more likely to be given the same courtesy when it’s your turn. Be willing to generate other options or change strategies.
10. **Face the problem/conflict/goal collaboratively – i.e. together.** Write down points agreed on *as you go*: “OK, we’ve agreed to...” This physical evidence of **synergy** demonstrates you’re capable of finding common ground, are making progress on which you can build and **creates momentum** for further mutually beneficial discussions and outcomes.



If you would like to learn more, visit our **Communication Strategies** pages and sign up for our **free bi-monthly Newsletter “Getting to Agreement”** which is packed with tips, advice, and topics such as communication focus, collaboration, mediation, negotiation strategies, questions and answers from subscribers and clients, recommended reading, case studies and website updates. Full of practical “how to” tools and techniques for communicating more effectively and achieving satisfying outcomes.