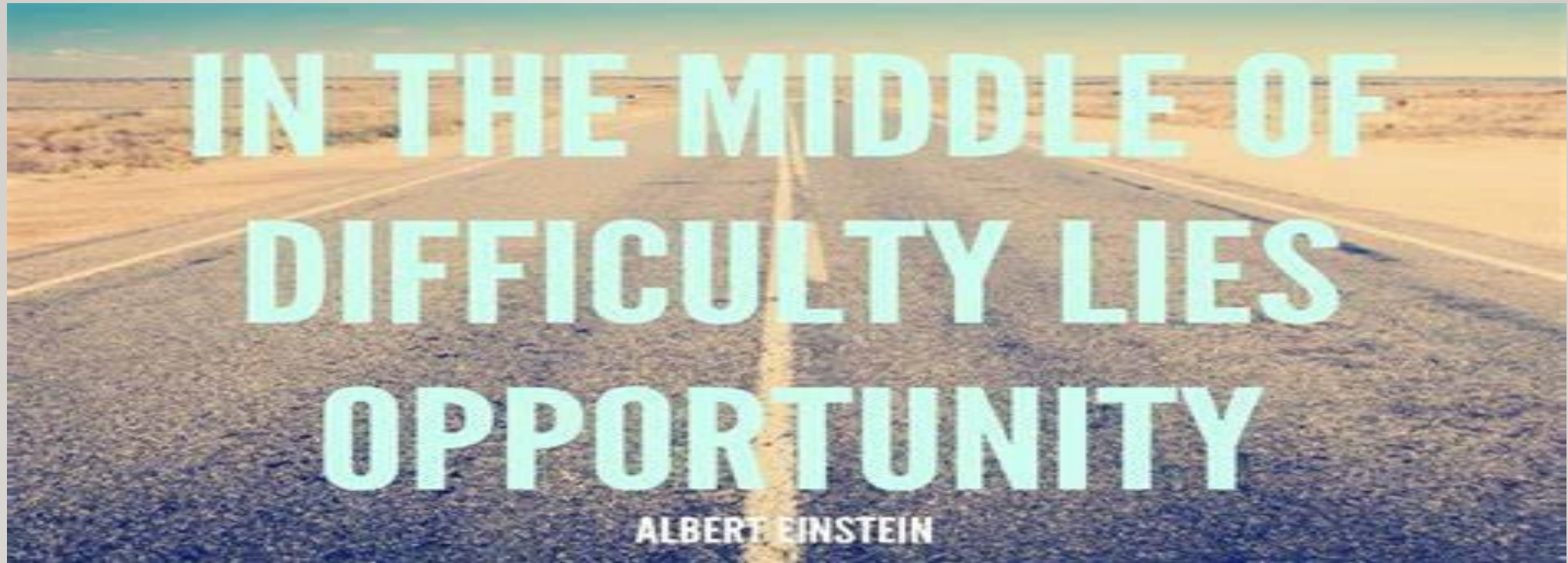


IDAHO ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

DE-ESCALATION: HANDLING DIFFICULT
SITUATIONS AND CONTENTIOUS
CONSTITUENTS

DAVID TALBOT - UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO, OMBUDS

THE BEAUTY OF CONFLICT IS THAT IT IS AN OPPORTUNITY
FOR GROWTH AND IMPROVED RELATIONSHIPS



THE BEAUTY OF CONFLICT AND HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



Conflict is normal and important. Without it we can't learn, grow and reach our full potential.



Navigate conflict with empathy and respect.

KEYS TO HANDLING DIFFICULT SITUATIONS AND CONTENTIOUS CONSTITUENTS



Trust



Feedback



Empathy



Listening

TRUST

**What builds
trust?**

**What erodes
trust?**

STRENGTHENING TRUST

- Trust is damaged when we use the language of trust without making space for disagreement or vulnerability.
- We often encourage one another to "assume positive intent" or "default to trust," but when those ideas are used to dismiss valid concerns or shut down difficult conversations, the message is clear: surface-level harmony matters more than truth.
- When trust becomes performative, people learn to stay quiet. That kind of environment may appear calm, but it is often brittle underneath.

STRENGTHENING TRUST

- Trust is not something you build once and cross off a list. It is a daily choice to engage, to be present, and to take others seriously. It can't be outsourced to culture statements or automated through policies. It shows up in how you respond when someone disagrees with you, in how you communicate under pressure, and in how well you understand the people you are trying to lead. Those who are most trusted aren't necessarily the most charismatic or the most experienced. They are the ones who are the most consistently human.

STRENGTHENING TRUST

- When we ask thoughtful questions and invite different viewpoints, it creates a culture where input is expected. It tells people that we value discovery, not just efficiency. That mindset encourages people to take ownership, solve problems creatively, and speak up before issues escalate. Curiosity builds the kind of shared ownership that deepens trust.

STRENGTHENING TRUST

- When people are afraid to be wrong, assume their voices won't matter, or just keep their heads down, they stop asking questions. And when people stop asking questions, trust breaks down.
- Encourage curiosity by showing that it is safe to speak, explore, and challenge respectfully.
- We can strengthen trust by helping one another develop confidence in our own judgment. That happens through supportive feedback, real listening, and invitations to contribute.

EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

- **Ask for feedback regularly.** Be the model for regular, effective, and compassionate feedback. Make room on your 1-1 meeting agendas. Never leave feedback discussions to the annual performance evaluation process or wait until relationships break down or conflict escalates. It should be regular, expected, anticipated, and valued as the gift that it is.
- Feedback without empathy will fall short

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO YOU AND TO YOUR COLLEAGUES?

We rarely take time to carefully excavate the deeper truths in our conflicts, mostly because our attention is focused on the mistakes and misdeeds of others, or on our own emotions and victimization. Most of our communications and nearly all of our conflicts are not at all about the topics we are urgently arguing over. The deeper we go, the more there is to see.



THE PLATINUM RULE

- Do unto others as they would have done to themselves. Treat others the way they want or need to be treated. Not the way you would want to be treated or the way you think others should be treated. It's another way of recognizing and satisfying the needs of others. A rule based on empathy.
- We follow the Platinum Rule by understanding and trying to meet the needs and interests of others. We can accomplish this through deep listening and practicing empathy.

EMPATHY

Empathy can come when we listen without trying to manipulate the discussion, judging, planning for the next question, or making assumptions about the other person's situation.



Not, “how would I feel walking a mile in his or her shoes?” but “how does he or she feel walking a mile in his or her shoes?”



Empathy is caring about and actively learning what is important to another person.

Six Fundamental Concerns



Safety



Respect



Belonging



Status



Autonomy



Fairness

The fundamental concerns are:

+ Instinctual

+ Demand satisfaction

When they are threatened, we react negatively

FUNDAMENTAL CONCERNS

OUR WORLDVIEW

- We each see the world through our own unique lens.
- It is as if we each have a pair of colored glasses over our eyes that have been shaped by our personal experiences, values, beliefs, and personality.
- Most of the time, we are not conscious of their existence.



HOW OFTEN
DO YOU ASK?

How are you doing?

What is most important to
you about...?

Is there anything I can do to
help?

ACTIVE LISTENING

What do you need to feel really heard, really listened to?

What do you try to do to make others feel the same?

In what ways are you a good listener?

In what ways can you be a better listener?

ACTIVE LISTENING

- Validating
- Paraphrasing and summarizing
- Reframing
- Prompting
- Responding to meaning
- Responding to feelings
- Responding to reasons for feelings

ACTIVE LISTENING

- Identifying common themes
- Identifying beliefs and assumptions
- Defining goals
- Providing information and suggestions
- Summarizing next step

Active Listening – Open Ended Questions

- They encourage others to share more information.
- Tell me what's happening...?
- What do you see as the problem?
- How did that make you feel?
- Tell me more about...
- What prevents you from...?
- What's the worst thing you can imagine happening if...

REACTIVE LISTENING

- Rehearsing
- Preparing your own argument before you have heard the other side
- Ordering
- Telling others what to do: “Stop it.”
- Threatening
- Telling others about the negative consequences of their actions. “If you do that, I’ll...”

Reactive Listening

- Judging
- Making negative evaluations of the parties' actions: "That's not right."
- Diagnosing
- Telling others what their motives are: "Sounds like you're jealous."
- Blaming
- Attributing fault elsewhere: "If they were not so incompetent this would never have happened."

The background is a vibrant blue with a repeating pattern of speech bubbles in various colors: red, yellow, pink, white, and dark grey. Each bubble contains a large, bold, dark blue question mark. The bubbles are scattered across the entire frame, creating a sense of ongoing conversation or inquiry.

THANK YOU!!

ARE THERE ANY ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?