Dealing with Conflict: An Autism Case Study

Discussion Guide

Note: The case study is available in two forms: A full-length document and an abbreviated adaptation. The abbreviated version contains most of the elements of conflict found in the full version, but it omits the budget crisis and conflict over the hiring of a family involvement coordinator. This Discussion Guide may be used with either version of the case study.

This case study highlights issues of trust, transparency, and representation in collaborative efforts that bring together disparate stakeholders. In this scenario, parent and family representatives are engaged in the planning process to ensure that the resulting program is informed by their experiences and needs. As it turns out, their experiences and needs are not necessarily in synch with those of the public health system, or even with each other. Add to that the constraints and challenges of working across agencies and service systems, and an eleventh-hour budget crisis, and the main character, Pete Carver, has quite a challenge on his hands.

This case study will be most effective as a teaching tool if discussion occurs in small groups. Participants may be able to draw from their own experiences in examining the leadership challenges presented in the scenario and identifying potential strategies. Discussion prompts and a “diagnosing disagreements” exercise are provided below.

Leadership Challenges:

- What leadership challenges does Pete face?
- What leadership qualities and skills will be most helpful to Pete in moving forward?

Building Relationships:

- How should Pete approach Family Voices, and what should be his goal? On which issues can they align themselves? What can Pete do to demonstrate to Family Voices that he is supporting the organization? Are there any budget-neutral issues that he can support for Family Voices?
- How can Pete strengthen ties between the autism community and the CSHCN system as a whole?
- [For the full-length case study only] How will the state budget crisis affect Pete’s ability to work with these two groups? Does the budget crisis offer any opportunities?
- How should Pete approach Libby Cockrell, and what should be his goal? How can Molly Stapleton help him in this? How can he make Libby Cockrell feel that she can part of the solution and not just a marginal committee member?
- [For the full-length case study only] What can Family Voices do to negotiate for their role effectively and realistically in this grim budget scenario? What role does grassroots support play?
- What can the Autism Society do to strengthen ties between the greater autism community, Family Voices, and the CSCHN program?
Managing Conflict:

- What kinds of responses to conflict did you see in the case study, or what responses would you anticipate given what you know about the characters? (Refer to the handout “Five Approaches to Handling Conflict” in Module 4.)
- Apply the “Diagnosing Disagreements” worksheet to this case study, working individually or in groups. Discuss:
  - What is the nature of the differences evidenced in the case study?
  - What other factors are at play?
  - Do you have any new insights into strategies Pete might employ?