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4-2-2014

Building BRIDGES: Fostering dialogue and shared understanding between communities and government agencies

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Recommended Citation

Weitzman, Eben and Kew, Darren, "Building BRIDGES: Fostering dialogue and shared understanding between communities and government agencies" (2014). *Office of Community Partnerships Posters*. 279. https://scholarworks.umb.edu/ocp_posters/279

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Building BRIDGES

Fostering dialogue and shared understanding between communities and government agencies

Summary

Professors Eben Weitzman and Darren Kew of the Department of Conflict Resolution, Human Security, and Global Governance at the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies facilitate dialogue among state and federal law enforcement agencies and representatives of Muslim and Sikh communities to help foster shared understanding and navigate challenges and opportunities inherent in their relationship. Working with the BRIDGES program, they are using group dialogue to help stakeholders build lasting, productive connections.

Goals and Objectives

- Apply conflict resolution and group dialogue theory and practice to assist the BRIDGES program in strengthening connections between state and federal agencies and minority communities in Massachusetts.
- Create a forum through which members of minority communities may speak directly with representatives of state and federal agencies to:
- seek help when community members are targets of discrimination, bias or hate
 - highlight and address concerns or questions about government policy or behavior
 - jointly address other matters of mutual concern



Results/Impacts

- Program assessment over past year led to major redesign and restructuring of BRIDGES for greater impact and visibility.
- Coordination during Boston Marathon bombing event through conference calls and individual outreach helped to lessen tensions, build trust, and avoid inflammatory actions.
- Monthly meetings and periodic large Town Hall events open lines of communication and allow for robust, candid discussions of substantive issues.
- The dialogue has fostered strong relationships among participants, which have facilitated spin-off activities—such as youth outreach and parenting support—and provide a platform for future communication and action.

Approach

Fostering understanding through dialogue
Town Halls conducted using an adaptation of the Open Space Technology of Harrison Owen¹. Key to this is the “Law of Two Feet”: Participants choose topics and move freely among multiple facilitated discussions depending upon what interests them.

Assessment and redesign conducted through feedback on years of observation, facilitation of self-assessment, and strategic restructuring.

¹Owen, H. (2008). *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*, 3rd Ed. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Conclusion/Next Steps

- Dialogue is an effective, but slow, process for building relationships and trust.
- The work to date has yielded important lines of communication, strong relationships, greater mutual understanding, and movement toward shared perspectives.
- The dialogue will continue, enabling the sometimes difficult conversations that are necessary for fostering understanding and cooperation.

Learn More

For more information about this project or to learn about our graduate programs in conflict resolution, www.conflict.umb.edu, eben.weitzman@umb.edu, or darren.kew@umb.edu