

December 30, 2014

To: Jan Voit/Heron Lake Watershed District

From: Bob McNaney/PadillaCRT

Re: December 2014 Communications Workshop

### **Overview**

PadillaCRT was asked to conduct a two day communications workshop for the board and staff of the Heron Lake Watershed District (HLWD). The workshop was held at the HLWD office on December 16 and 17, 2014.

The workshop was requested as a result of a breakdown in communication between members of the board and the staff.

The morning of Day One was well spent in a group setting with individual one-on-one meetings between staff and board members and Bob McNaney.

Day Two provided two hours to review what was discussed the day before, provide my perspective on the discussion, and develop next steps for the staff and board to undertake to resolve the communications issues.

This report will respect requests made to not necessarily name names when describing people's feelings toward one another.

### **Approach to Workshop**

I had the group introduce themselves to me and to one another, serving as an icebreaker. I presented a PowerPoint presentation entitled "Difficult Conversations and Their Role in Building Relationships." The presentation shows a seven step approach to conflict resolution and the beginning of effective communications. The session lasted two hours and covered these subjects:

1. Conflict is often the difference between two stories
2. Assuming negative intent and negative character
3. Moving from assigning blame to mapping out contributions
4. Acknowledging and expressing feelings
5. Recognizing the effect of conflict on "identity"
6. Always having a conflict resolution strategy in mind
7. Difficult conversations will move your business forward
8. Assuming ill intent will almost never lead to satisfactory resolution
9. Conflict does not always require a winner and a loser

The afternoon of Day One was spent in one-hour sessions with each board member. The staff and I spoke for about 30 minutes at the end of the day. The goal was to allow each person to speak freely without the pressure of having others in the room.

Day Two was an open format designed for me to present my findings, allow each member of the board and staff to communicate their feelings and observations regarding Day One, and for me to present my observations.

### **Key Findings**

There is no doubt this group was facing considerable conflict with one another. The silence in the room during the morning of Day One was telling. The negative body language of both board and staff members told a story of distrust, disrespect, and pure disdain for one another. It was very quiet with little input from either the board or the staff.

However, a central theme that emerged was that board members and the staff did **not trust one another**. A couple of the reasons behind this included a lack of communication and the presumption that a person's motives were always based in ill-will. Interestingly, this organization has done great work despite not trusting one another.

In contrast to the morning session, I found the afternoon one-on-one sessions interesting, honest, and enlightening. Each person spoke openly about the others and the role they themselves were playing in creating turmoil within the organization. Several members revealed placing their own anger for one another above the work of the district.

It became clear that this is a divided board. While some members expressed a willingness to work with one another, an "every person for themselves" attitude surfaced. Members told me they vote based on their own beliefs and do not take one another's positions or expertise into consideration. I found an "I'm right, and they're wrong" mentality amongst the groups.

A troubling truth became clear as a result of this workshop. The stress and conflict within the organization has led to staff and board members feeling physically ill, afraid to attend meetings, or speak to one another. When I told the group this fact on Day Two, they all showed true concern for one another. Each person assumed they were the only one feeling sick. It was a significant breakthrough moment. The board and staff began viewing one another as people, not adversaries.

To the credit of the board and staff, each person admitted some fault in creating a bad situation for the district. Each also pledged to take steps to strengthen their commitment to improving communications. (*Steps are outlined in meeting minutes.*)

### **Next Steps**

1. Check in to determine progress made, identify little victories, and determine considerations for improvement by April 1, 2015.
2. Make an attempt to get to know the board and staff members in a more personal way.

3. Show up at each meeting with a different attitude.
4. Forget about the past, open the book to a new page and start over, forgetting the negative and remembering the good.
5. Obtain a better understanding of staff responsibilities.
6. Hold individual meetings.
7. Communicate better with staff about tasks to be undertaken.
8. Provide board member communications with staff between and before meetings.
9. Ask more open ended questions.
10. Move the meeting location and structure.
11. Talk to one another before meetings.
12. Add discussion items to the agenda.

### **Conclusion**

I believe the board and staff have taken great steps in recognizing the issues, committing to change, and refocusing on the work of the watershed district. We discussed the motto "*respect each other, respect the earth, respect the water.*" It is my belief that each member of the organization will do just that.

Upon leaving the workshop, I saw several members in relaxed conversations with one another – a much different scenario from when the workshop started. This is testament to the individuals who make up the HLWD. Each should be commended for turning the page and moving forward with the important work of the district.