

Part 4: Creating Neutral Space for Challenging Conversations

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Like other states, Maine faces serious and complex problems with health care. Though it is tempting to rely on pundits or experts to solve these problems, one or two health care gurus are not going to do it. More than genius, we need each other. We need the best thinking and contributions of everyone involved to transform health care in Maine.

Often the first step to address intractable issues like those we face in health care is to begin an open dialogue about possibilities and the potential for change. As an independent, private foundation, MeHAF is ideally positioned to bring people together to work on these challenging issues in a neutral environment.

Neutralizing the political charge

Health care is political by its very nature. As an economic sector it represents over one-sixth of our national gross domestic product. At the state and national level, it is intertwined with legislation, party platforms, and campaigns. At all levels, there are competing interests that affect a thousand decisions every day, often with direct impact on the public and on the life and death of individual patients.

Health care access, cost and quality problems are challenging enough by themselves, but politics, budget constraints and turf battles have made it increasingly difficult to have frank conversations to solve them. There are many interests and positions that threaten to divide us just at the time when we need to work together the most. And the greatest price is ultimately paid by the end users – patients.

As a neutral convener, we look for ways to bring diverse stakeholders together, to create a forum for conversation and elicit their best thinking. We step into this environment with no attachment to a specific outcome, other than a desire to define the problems together and find solutions that work for patients, especially those who are uninsured or medically underserved.

Health care will continue to be political. But if we can create a safe place for honest conversations and divergent thinking, we can move out of the infinite loop of disagreement and turf into productive conversations about viable solutions.

Fostering “creative abrasion”

“Creative abrasion” is a term used to describe how people with diverse perspectives can refine each other’s ideas, but it requires the right atmosphere to get the most productive thinking. It is possible only when there is a welcoming space for those difficult conversations. With the help of a neutral convener, people can have difficult conversations and speak honestly, even when they know others may disagree with them.

Bringing grantees together is one way to foster creative abrasion in a safe, neutral space. Reflecting on a grantee convening experience, Shaun Alfreds of grantee HealthInfoNet noted that honest conversations with other grantees helped them develop a sound data use policy. “[There were] folks in the room ... talking about data ownership, privacy at the patient level, the use of data at the provider level, and the need for data at the employer and the payer level,” says Alfreds. “Having conversations around the table helped us to develop a data use policy,

which allowed us to come forward and get providers comfortable with working very closely with a payer ... in a much different way than they ever have.” <https://vimeo.com/135062615>. This grantee convening gave HealthInfoNet the opportunity to work through concerns, opposition and potential data turf battles in a safe space before sharing their work with a wider group of stakeholders.

When grantees come together in a neutral space, the insights they get from one another are often serendipitous. Gordon Smith, Executive Vice President of the Maine Medical Association, described one meeting in which he participated in a discussion “with people that I wouldn’t normally see but once or twice a year, if that.” He went on to describe “a very substantive conversation about the guts of the issue of primary care physicians, specialty physicians and engagement. That was one of the best conversations I had in 2014.” <https://vimeo.com/135062616>.

Bringing reliable information to the conversation

As a neutral convener, we must offer reliable and balanced information to inform the conversation in addition to providing a forum. Decision makers and stakeholders can begin an honest conversation only when they have information that all parties trust. Vanessa Santarelli of the Maine Primary Care Association says it this way: “[T]he credibility and the expertise that [MeHAF] brings to the work is noted and rightly so.” She believes that the investment MeHAF makes in research and analysis is invaluable because of the way it equips decision makers with “information, data and facts that can inform their decisions.” <https://vimeo.com/135062619>.

Melissa Skahan from grantee organization Mercy Health System agrees that a “powerful convener” is one that will “share best practices” and bring reliable information to the conversation. This information allows her and others to “look at things differently” and find new pathways and solutions. <https://vimeo.com/135062617>.

Setting a collaborative tone

The connections that form when we facilitate conversations bring new life to health reform work. It creates a different approach to solving problems: one that we hope will spread to other meetings and discussions.

This collaborative spirit is the most important outcome of our role as neutral convener. A neutral convener has the opportunity to give a rare gift: a protected space and time for the community to take a collective deep breath, learn about one another’s concerns and perspectives, and face challenges and opportunities together.