

6-20-14 Weathering the Storm

Climate change might be causing more severe weather events but when it comes to people and working out issues and disagreements, I don't think much has changed over the eons; we have to get through it and go through it. As issues arise and people gather at meetings to bring attention to certain situations and raise awareness of a problem or need, just the gathering can be difficult. Who will arrive? Was there enough time and notification? If it is a town meeting, people worry if there will be a quorum. We won't have a chance, though, if we don't gather in the first place.

Once the gathering has begun, the differences of opinion emerge. There might be long held anger or frustration. Hostilities might occur. We begin to appreciate moderators in those circumstances. The turbulent phase can be so frustrating that participants might drop out of the process. Cynicism sets in as some are convinced change will never occur. If enough brave souls continue to meet, a bona fide group has formed.

It takes great patience and determination to continue meeting, talking, meeting and talking. It pays off, though. Patience and determination are two weapons against worn out useless traditions filled with inequity. If we can stay in there, and continue the battle with reason and facts, a new group begins to take shape; one with a variety of needs being addressed and with a variety of opinions respected. The new group that formed has made it through the storm. The personalities and opinions and needs are known and being addressed; what was problematic and divisive has settled down and there is a new norm.

At this stage in the process, the group is finally ready to perform. Action is progress where once only hostility was seen. Performance becomes positive; not harmful. Results represent the needs of many; equity begins to be seen.

I recently discovered a model of group development or team building because I saw it happening. If I had learned about it at a conference or read about and tried to apply it, I am not so sure that I could have made it work. It would have been on my mind. It would have felt forced. I am certain I would have naively shared my intentions and hopes and then would have been even more self-conscious. I was just one of those many brave souls (I'll give myself that.) who plugged on through the mud and slowly but surely the atmosphere became more clear and there was hope on the horizon!

The model I refer to is Form-Storm-Norm-Perform. In Halifax we have been slugging and trudging our way through this process to clean up the Monponsett Ponds. The Monponsett Watershed Association was formed. The group widened and wiser more informed people joined to represent Silver Lake, the Taunton River Watershed and lands protected by Audubon. The Monponsett Working Group was formed. State legislators became involved. State Departments of Environmental Protection and Public Health became involved. Cranberry growers joined the conversation and shared ideas and solutions regarding reducing phosphorous to the water bodies. The Monponsett Ponds and Stump Brook were designated by the Massachusetts Division of Ecological Restoration as a Priority Project. That's pretty cool when you think about it; finally

the recognition of the need! The City of Brockton is represented but only by one person. That is pretty weird when you think about it. Brockton, we need you to send more people to the table.

We have come so far in this round table discussion where forming, storming, norming and finally, performing, has evolved, that we even have the attention of the feds. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is working with the Town of Halifax as a pilot project for using their Watershed Management Optimization Support Tool (WMOST). It will result in a cost benefit analysis of the goals and solutions chosen and prioritized by the group. It will help us to make informed decisions in the future. That is the MOST we can hope for when working on complicated problems requiring complicated solutions and the involvement of many people, many groups, all with their own needs.

Where will we meet on the issues? I don't know exactly but there will be a meeting of the minds and we are on the right path. That's certainly a climate change for the better.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax and Plympton. She can be reached at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us