

IN BOARD OF SUDBURY SELECTMEN
MONDAY, JUNE 29, 2015

Present: Chairman Patricia A. Brown, Vice-Chairman Susan N. Iuliano, Selectman Robert C. Haarde, Selectman Leonard A. Simon, Selectman Charles C. Woodard, Interim Town Manager Maryanne Bilodeau and Jon Wortmann of Novel Communications

The statutory requirements as to notice having been complied with, the meeting was convened at 5:11 p.m. in the Goodnow Library Historical Room, 21 Concord Road.

Jon Wortmann began the meeting by stating that the goal of his work with the Board of Selectmen is to provide tools to enable Board members to argue and disagree while continuing to work together and be good “teammates” afterwards. He stated that since the Town has a history of communication difficulties, this work presents an opportunity to break a pattern.

Minutes Content

It was agreed that minutes for the evening’s session would reflect tools, concepts and examples discussed at the meeting but would omit personal experiences and feelings shared by Board members. Initial meetings will emphasize communication strategies and not discussion of Town business. Subsequent meetings may be different and the style of Minutes will be adjusted accordingly.

It was also agreed that there would be no audio recording of the evening’s meeting.

Recognizing Communication Tendencies

The aim of the first exercise was to show how the brain works under stress. Board members were asked to share recent experiences that they consider to be low stress and high stress. Mr. Wortmann explained that the act of recalling a positive memory was sufficient to lower stress and a useful tool at the beginning of a meeting.

In defining stress, Mr. Wortmann explained that the part of the brain called the amygdala is responsible for alerting a person to remove themselves from a dangerous situation. For example, during an encounter with a bear, a “short loop” of unpleasant memories would trigger a person to run away from the bear. This response was once crucial for human survival and the amygdala’s function continues today, even though we encounter far fewer life threatening situations in modern day than during prehistoric times.

The “Rail Trail” was provided as a topic that could potentially raise stress levels for Board members. It was mentioned that while the topic might be of concern, it didn’t necessarily raise stress. Mr. Wortmann responded that anything that attracts attention creates a certain amount of stress. He explained that a “ping” from a phone, signaling a received email, text message, or other notification has been shown to deliver a small dose of dopamine to the recipient’s brain. Thus, even under what are considered normal work/life conditions, the stress baseline for many individuals is at a 6-8 out of 10, even prior to encountering a “storm” or stressful situation.

Mr. Wortmann explained that the brain’s hippocampus stores memories and releases them in response to certain circumstances. Simply thinking of pleasant memories can have the impact of lowering someone’s stress level. Similarly, simply thinking of a difficult topic can raise stress. As associations of stressful memories are stored, an individual can experience stress simply by encountering a person who previously caused them stress, even prior to engaging in conversation with them.

Mr. Wortmann offered an example of this type of stress-triggering association, citing issues encountered by former military personnel in returning to civilian life. While deployed, active duty personnel learned to associate a white van with extreme danger as it may have been a transport for militants or explosives. A van

encountered after such an association has been made will trigger a significant stress response, even though a white van encountered back home may contain flowers, a cake or other harmless items. In order to successfully reintegrate into civilian life, it will be important for the service member to recall that, in the context of home, a van may not pose a threat.

Similarly, to begin to tackle stressful issues, it's important to identify the "short loop" memories that occur when a stressor is present, and consciously turn to "long loop" recall that help an individual to "pause and turn down the alarm" in order to reassess the situation. Referring back to the example of a caveman fleeing from a bear, Mr. Wortmann explained that in actuality, running from a bear has been shown to be ineffective in preventing being mauled by one, as the bear is most likely to give chase when a person runs. In dealing with Grizzly Bears, a person is advised to "get small" by rolling into a ball or fetal position so the bear will lose interest. In dealing with Black Bears, a person is advised to "get big" so the bear will become intimidated and flee. In both cases, responding to the "short loop" and running from the bear, is more dangerous than using the "long loop" to access the most appropriate response of either "getting big" or "getting small," depending on the type of bear.

Mr. Wortmann explained that "bears" or "monsters" are perceptions of people, places or things that cause stress. He said that he will work with the Board to identify their "monsters" in order to place them in their proper context and respond to them appropriately. He provided the example of Google strategy sessions. At Google meetings, a topic is presented from two opposing sides. The sides argue vehemently for their position (using stress for good – to make a compelling argument) and afterwards share a snack in the break room. They are able to accomplish this by defining a "clear process" and remembering "core values".

It was expressed that disagreement was not the cause of stress during Board meetings, but rather the combative tone with which disagreements are delivered. Mr. Wortmann said that learning the seven different communication tendencies will help alter an individual's reaction to someone's tone. Some people have a combative tone by nature and these sessions aim to remove the stress triggered by hearing such a tone.

The next exercise was to define everyone's core values, to examine why they choose to be leaders within the Town and to see what Board members wish to accomplish in Sudbury. The reasons given for choosing to be leaders included the desire to solve problems and take on challenges; give back to the community; advance Town issues; build community; and resolve situations. Ways in which Board members wish to improve Sudbury included providing clear information that would lead to open decisions, encouraging involvement of the "silent majority" (residents who don't express their views); advancing planning and organization in light of competing priorities; and improving civil discourse.

Mr. Wortmann noted that because social media is so prevalent, it is necessary to discuss and agree upon its use as a Board. He explained that when millennials feel that discourse with their friends on social media is becoming overly negative, they "call" the person involved as soon as possible to resolve the issue. They know to regard social media as a tool rather than the whole conversation. He said that it may be of further benefit for the Board to determine how, if at all, to define or redefine general communication tools. He asked the Board what each member considers to be the quickest way possible to get a hold of someone. Responses included sending a text message or placing a call, with some stating that, depending on the situation or the person they are trying to reach, phone may be faster.

Returning to the topic of shared values, transparency was brought up with the specific example of a special meeting held on Wednesday, June 17 at 8 a.m. The meeting had originally been called in order to accommodate an application for a one day Wine & Malt License submitted on June 11 for an event scheduled for June 20. An additional agenda item to approve the mission statement of and appoint members to the newly formed Budget Strategies Task Force was later added onto that special meeting. There was disagreement about whether

the addition of the Task Force agenda item was necessary from an administrative perspective or whether the item could wait until an evening meeting for consideration as morning meetings may be viewed as less accessible to the public. An additional concern was exclusion of those unable to attend more than a short portion of the special meeting.

Mr. Wortmann pointed out that everyone was not being heard on the matter and points of view were not being validated in the conversation. He explained that while it is not necessary to agree, using the word “but” after restating another person’s point of view negates that point of view. He demonstrated that seeing the situation from the other person’s perspective and using “and” instead of “but” helps move the conversation forward. He asked if it was possible for others to see that someone could feel that their voice was being silenced if a meeting was scheduled during a time they could not attend. He further asked if it was possible to see that the intent in adding the Budget Strategies Task Force item to the special meeting agenda was to address administrative requirements. Board members agreed that both perspectives are valid.

Mr. Wortmann emphasized that it is important for everyone to feel that their perspective is validated and that their input is taken into consideration. All Board members are unpaid volunteers and are keenly aware of the large amount of time and energy required of each of them, thus it is each Board member’s responsibility to validate the work of other Board members. To facilitate this, Mr. Wortmann suggested that a “Rip Cord” rule be instated. This would mean that discussion of an agenda item could be postponed if a Board member made the request to do so, as a way to prevent anyone from feeling excluded.

Mr. Wortmann explained that there are “Seven Communication Tendencies”. By not matching tendencies in conversation, and particularly in disagreements, makes it difficult for the parties involved to hear one another. Two of the tendencies are “Debater” and “Pleaser,” both of which are exhibited by Board members. Different tendencies can be exhibited by the same person at different times. The other tendencies will be further discussed at future meetings.

After discussion of circumstances for use, it was agreed that the “Rip Cord” rule would be used to postpone discussion of an issue to a later meeting if any Board member felt that additional time or preparation was needed to properly address the issue, absent a compelling need to address the item at the earlier time. Examples of situations that could prevent postponement of the item included issues of public safety or the deadline to set the tax rates within the taxation cycle. It was agreed to put the “Rip Cord” rule into effect, starting immediately. It was further stated that the rule is not intended as a permanent policy and is in effect at least until we meet again.

It was decided that the next meeting with Jon Wortmann would not be recorded, but if future meetings are to involve discussion of Town business, then taping would be requested.

Future Meeting Dates/Times with Jon Wortmann

At 6:50 p.m., Ms. Bilodeau opened discussion of Board Members’ future availability to meet with Jon Wortmann. It was agreed that the next meeting date would be determined via email. Ms. Brown stated that the next meeting would again be posted as an open meeting.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 6:53 p.m.

Attest: _____

Maryanne Bilodeau
Interim Town Manager-Clerk