

# Tools for Navigating Change

In this report, EXPLO Elevate presents a case study on a school community wrestling with whether or not to eliminate Advanced Placement (AP) courses. The community soon realizes the problem goes beyond a decision on eliminating APs and tackles the thorny problem by employing three of the Bridgeway Group's tools for conflict management: the Stakeholder Mapping Process; the Strategic Trust Tool; and the Ladder of Inference.



## Introduction

*Legacy School is located in a major U.S. city. The 7-12th grade day school is large, well-endowed, and considered the leading independent school in the area. The school proclaims on its website that it offers rigorous college preparation and its graduates matriculate at the nation's leading colleges and universities.*

The school proudly reports that in a given year, Legacy students take 1000 Advanced Placement (AP) exams and upwards of 90% score three or higher while 145 students are designated AP Scholars.

Over the past five years, the number of students taking two APs per year has increased substantially as has the number taking three per year. Elective courses that were once popular are lagging in enrollment. Students say they are interested in the electives, but they don't feel they can afford to take them since they won't help them get into college.

Many faculty feel as though AP courses do not result in deep learning and that the faculty could design far better courses that would be more engaging, rigorous and interdisciplinary — and therefore more relevant to the preparation of students for life, college, and the future. There is a growing desire on the part of the faculty to eliminate APs.

Because there is a fear that a lack of APs might harm Legacy students in the college admissions process, the Director of College Counseling met with the admissions deans from many of the most competitive colleges and universities that Legacy students have attended over the years. Across the board, the deans of admission said that eliminating APs would have little bearing on the decision-making process. These results were reported back to the faculty.

There is a growing sentiment that the college admission process is playing too big a role in curricular decisions and that the atmosphere of the school is moving in directions that don't support healthy learning and being. The pressure on students to achieve is enormous and rates of anxiety and depression are high. That said, each time the issue has come up at faculty meetings, it gets dispensed with fairly quickly or is tabled.

Though formal faculty meetings have not been the arena where faculty can engage on the issue, this does not mean that they are not frequently discussing the topic with one another. Lunch tables, department offices, the sidelines at games, and the parking lot have all become places where faculty connect with one another to talk about what they are seeing, hearing, and feeling — that the school is somehow going down the wrong path.

## Many faculty members think that eliminating AP courses should be a decision made jointly by the faculty and the administration, even while recognizing that the final decision would be made by the Head of School.

The Head of School, however, seems to want to avoid making a decision, though it is not clear why. There is some suspicion that he is afraid of both the parents and the board of trustees, especially since the board includes many current parents. Rumors are swirling that the Director of Admission, the Director of Marketing, and the Business Manager are opposed to dropping APs, which has some faculty asking why they should have any say in curricular decisions at all.

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Students and their parents are also intimately involved in the issue. Legacy's Counseling Office cannot keep up with the students who are coming in with mental health issues, a large number of which point to their fear and anxiety around the college application process. Parents are very concerned about their children's increasing stress levels. At the same time, parents themselves are anxious and stressed. They are making great sacrifices to send their children to a school that will help ensure they become successful adults. Anecdotal evidence is that alums are proud of the fact that so many Legacy students are getting into top-ranked colleges, and while some might be in favor of eliminating AP courses, there is concern that others would not be supportive of the move. Given that alumni financial support is a key component of the operating budget, there is some fear that dropping APs might impact giving.

Exacerbating the problem is the poor quality of communication among many of the members of the Legacy community. To date, the Director of College Counseling has not shared the results of her conversations with the college admissions deans to anyone other than the faculty. As a result, students, parents, and alumni are unaware that the deans believe the elimination of AP courses at the school would have no bearing on the number of Legacy students admitted to their institutions. Given that this is one of the key issues for students and parents with regard to the college admissions process, faculty feel strongly that the issue could be quickly resolved if this impediment were removed. Yet that information-sharing process has not happened, contributing to both the cynicism and resentment of faculty members, and damaging trust between the faculty and the administration.

Another big part of the issue is that the decision-making process to determine the fate of AP courses is unclear. Is it a committee that investigates and makes a decision? Who are the members of that committee? Faculty and administration? Or should the composition be broader, including a student, a parent, and/or an alum? How involved should other school administrators be in the process, if at all (e.g., someone from college counseling; someone from marketing; the school's Director of Admissions; the school psychologist)? Alternatively, is it simply the Head of School's decision? And if the decision is made to eliminate the AP courses, a host of other questions arise: What is the timeline? How long will it take to design new courses to replace them? Who is in charge of designing those courses to ensure that the gap left by the AP course elimination is adequately filled with an equally rigorous curriculum?

The school has reached a tipping point and action is needed. Yesterday there was a board meeting and at a break a board member approached the Head of School and said, "Saturday, I was at a field hockey game and started speaking with a couple of teachers. I asked them how things were going and they told me not so well. Seems the faculty is really unhappy about all sorts of things. Faculty meetings. APs. The schedule. The college search process. What's going on?" The Head of School fumbled with an answer, but understood that he could no longer avoid dealing with the faculty's concerns. Unfortunately, the problem has become so complex and the positions of each stakeholder so entrenched, it is hard to know where to start.

**The profile of Legacy School was compiled from interviews and research conducted by EXPLO Elevate.**

# Conflict Management Tools for Managing Thorny Problems

*One option for untangling this knotty problem is to apply tools from the conflict management field.*

There are three tools that can help the Legacy School community to better understand the problem confronting them and help them to more strategically map out a path to a solution. These tools include the Stakeholder Mapping Process; the Strategic Trust Tool; and the Ladder of Inference. By developing a more nuanced understanding of the stakeholders and their interests, rebuilding trust among all the players, and employing more effective communication skills, the Legacy School community can find a solution to the question of whether or not to eliminate AP courses that meets the key interests of all the stakeholders.

## The Stakeholder Mapping Process

Stakeholder Mapping is a tool used to manage negotiations and decision-making processes that involve multiple parties and require agreement from various groups or individuals. As a preparation tool, the Stakeholder Mapping Process works as follows: the negotiator (or decisionmaker) identifies their own interests, maps the key parties (stakeholders) involved and highlights those parties' interests, and characterizes all relevant relationships. This tool allows negotiators to ultimately plan and implement a sequence of one-on-one negotiations and strategic conversations that leverage and reshape multiparty relationships to increase the probability of a successful, interest-based outcome.

**In order to apply the tool, we need to situate ourselves on the stakeholder map. For illustrative purposes, let's assume we are the Legacy School Head of School. Before making a decision, let's prepare a stakeholder map.**

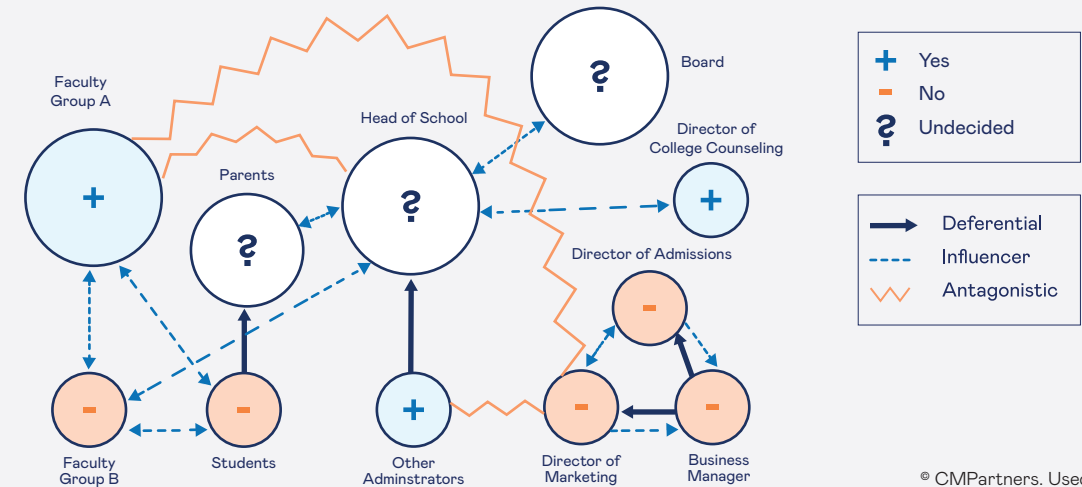
**FIRST STEP** is to clarify the question we are trying to answer (or the proposal on which we need a decision). At first, it seemed like the decision under consideration was "eliminate AP courses or not." In fact, upon further research, the more important consideration is how the decision should be made. Once we have clarified that, then that decision-making process can be used to decide whether or not to eliminate the AP courses.

**SECOND STEP** is to enumerate our interests. What are our hopes, fears, and desires that motivate our decision vis à vis the question at hand? For example, we want to retain an effective working relationship with the board and with parents; we want to honor the faculty's role in making decisions that impact the school curriculum; we want to set a good precedent for future decisions of this kind; we want to ensure we are cultivating an environment that helps students thrive academically and personally, etc.

**THIRD STEP** we should undertake is to ask, "Who are all of the parties directly involved in this decision (e.g., faculty, others) and/or who will be impacted by the decision (e.g., students, parents, others)?" Include as many relevant stakeholders as possible, especially those who may not be involved in the decision but who could potentially act as a "spoiler" or negatively impact the decision or its implementation. Including those stakeholders can help us to understand how to be proactive in taking their interests into account and/or mitigating their influence by isolating them.

**Then**, we plot the stakeholders on a map, using the size of the circle to denote the relative power that party has vis à vis the question under consideration — in this case, what process should be used to make the decision. For example, the faculty will likely have a larger circle than the Director of Marketing or alums. Each party should also be identified by the strength of its position on the question under consideration: for (+), against (-), uncertain (?), or neutral (=).

## Stakeholder Map Should Legacy School eliminate the APs?



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**In addition**, if we are identifying a group or organization as a "party," then we need to identify who within each of the parties either has the authority to make a decision on behalf of the group/organization or can strongly influence that decision. Is it the head of the faculty council? The chair of the board? The head of the parent-teacher association? Understanding who that person is will help us to better plan our sequence of meetings and more effectively influence them. Keep in mind that some individuals will have informal "power" — meaning they can influence the decisions of others, even though they are not in a decision-making role themselves. In some cases they may not even be part of the group (e.g., a very influential parent who is not a member of the board may still have a lot of influence with the board).

**NOTE:** *It is important to remember that a stakeholder map is most useful when created with a particular proposal or issue in mind. The parties may have different levels of power and/or different positions when considering another issue (e.g., whether or not to build a new athletic facility) than for the question of eliminating the AP courses.*

**FOURTH STEP**, identify the interests of each party. While some interests may overlap with our own (and with other parties), many may not. For example, the board may feel that a decision of this import should fall within its bailiwick. The faculty may feel that they have the biggest voice because of their role in designing the curriculum. The college counselor may want to inform the decision. The deeper the interests analysis for each key stakeholder, the more information that we will have when building a coalition to support the decision-making process that ultimately gets agreed upon.

**FIFTH STEP** requires us to characterize and map the relationships among the parties. Look for relationships among key parties — alliances, partnerships, hierarchical structures, information flows, friendships, and family connections. We want to identify those stakeholders with whom we can work and/or build a coalition. And we want to know who might be antagonistic and whose influence we may want to try to mitigate. Observe relationship patterns that may facilitate or preclude an agreement including:

**Influence:** Party A is likely to consider Party B's lead, advice, wishes, or direction.

**Deference:** Party A is likely to follow Party B's lead, advice, wishes, or direction.

**Antagonism:** Party A will not follow Party B's lead, advice, wishes or direction.

**Finally, we will plan a sequence of one-on-one meetings and conversations that will help us leverage and/or reshape the relationship map to better serve our interests.**

“ The schools can become the incubation unit of a new culture in Burundi; one without violence and one [that privileges] dialogue.

- Minister of Education, Burundi

### *Stakeholder Mapping to build support for an innovative new civics curriculum in Burundi, Africa*

In 2008, the new Minister of Education of the tiny African country of Burundi decided that he wanted to include a conflict resolution module as part of the new high school civics curriculum. Such a program focused on secondary school students was particularly important in Burundi at that time, because during the country’s thirteen-year civil war schools were often the target of extreme violence, serving as the incubators of ethnic polarization and as the sources of recruitment of child soldiers.

As the Minister of Education stated at the time, “the schools can become the incubation unit of a new culture in Burundi; one without violence and one [that privileges] dialogue.” But the Minister encountered resistance from a number of different directions when he suggested his new plan. For example: the Head of the Pedagogy Department at the Ministry did not want more work on her already overloaded plate as school reform was a number one priority of the new administration; the school administrators were wary of upsetting the delicate calm that they had created in the post-war environment; and the teachers were leery of having yet one more course to teach in an under-resourced environment with no materials to support them.

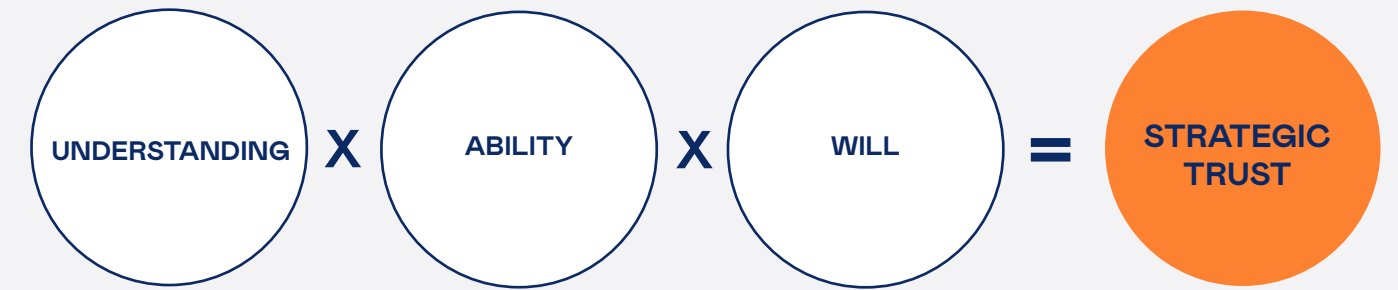
To build buy-in, the Minister, supported by Bridgeway Group team members, engaged in a Stakeholder Mapping Process. He identified the key actors and their interests, mapped the relationships among them, and then planned and implemented a series of meetings with those actors to build support for his idea. The Minister began with the Head of the Pedagogy Department. As a political appointee with a lot of clout in the new ruling party, the Minister knew that her support would be decisive. He was able to allay

her fears of an increased workload by assigning a new team member to work specifically with the project team and he assured her that the project team would be responsible for the day-to-day work, under her oversight.

With her buy-in secured, the Minister then met with key civil servants in the Ministry as well as with regional education officials. The Ministry of Education is Burundi’s largest employer. Without ensuring that both the Ministry bureaucrats and the regional power brokers were on board, the Minister would have been stymied by bureaucratic red tape from a range of middle-level managers upset that they had not been consulted (despite their relatively small role in the project).

From there, the Minister had the regional education officials persuade the heads of schools (public, parochial and independent) to join the effort, reminding them that there would be more resources available to them if they were willing participate. With the resources promised, the teachers reluctantly agreed to the pilot project. In a parallel process, the Minister approached diplomats and donors also involved in education in Burundi with an appeal to join his effort, emphasizing the conflict-prevention aspects of the new curriculum.

**In the end, the Minister’s Stakeholder Mapping Process not only built support for the initiative, it provided critical input to facilitate the integration of the new module into the existing civics curriculum and helped the team to identify the necessary resources to get the program off the ground, including the funds for the development of both student and teacher manuals.**



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## The Strategic Trust Tool

*A second challenge confronting the Legacy School community is deteriorating trust.*

Without a reservoir of trust among community members, the conversation about an issue as weighty as the decision to eliminate AP courses has become tense and filled with recrimination. The parties no longer trust each other’s motives, making it difficult to have a productive conversation about both the future of AP courses and the decision-making process that should be used to determine their fate.

Our understanding of “trust” generally revolves around one common hypothesis: the idea that we can rely on another person and have confidence in their motives, judgments and actions simply because we “feel” good about them. This understanding reflects our social nature, our desire to accept others and be accepted by them, and our need to be part of a functioning community. It is a primal need and, as such, is closely tied to our emotions. And when this emotional trust is broken, the effects can be traumatic: relationships can become dysfunctional; dialogue can grind to a halt; and this broken trust can take years to rebuild.

To rebuild trust, we (the Head of School) will need to do more than make an emotional appeal to the affections of the faculty toward the school or the students.

In the context of personal relationships, the traditional notion of trust is appropriate. Yet the very characteristics — the gut feeling — that makes traditional trust appropriate for personal relationships are less helpful to us in a professional setting where we still need to work together even though we may not know one another, we may not like each other, and/or our confidence has been betrayed and commitments have not been honored. Under these conditions, we have to incrementally rebuild a foundation for a trusting relationship. These negotiations require a different form of trust; something that can be called “strategic trust.” Strategic Trust requires creating the processes for and conditions within which the likelihood that one party will meet its obligations and satisfy the interests of the other party is significantly increased. Unlike emotional trust, Strategic Trust is measurable and manageable.

**More specifically, Strategic Trust is evaluated using three variables.**

If your assessment of any one of these variables is ‘0’, then the Strategic Trust equation equals zero — meaning that you have not yet built Strategic Trust with the other party.

**1. Understanding: Do they understand my interests?**

**2. Ability: Do they have the ability to address my interests?**

**3. Willingness: Are they willing to act in my interest(s)?**

And have I demonstrated the same to the other party or parties?

**Once we have concluded our assessment, we can generate concrete steps to address the lack of trust. If there is insufficient Strategic Trust, we identify the deficient trust variable (understanding? ability? willingness?) and address that through actions both within and apart from the decision-making process.**

# Not only had the war torn the social fabric of Burundi, it also destroyed Burundians' faith in their institutions... schools were the site of horrible violence and recruiting grounds for child soldiers.

## Rebuilding Trust in Burundi's National Education System

One of the biggest challenges in implementing the civics curriculum project in Burundi was the lack of trust among the teachers, school administrator's and their communities. Not only had the war torn the social fabric of Burundi, it also destroyed Burundians' faith in their institutions. For the second time in Burundi's history, schools were the site of horrible violence and recruiting grounds for child soldiers. Previously, in the 1972 'selective genocide' of 150,000 Hutu, Burundian high school students were some of the main targets as the Hima Tutsi-led Army attempted to eliminate all 'educated' Hutu. For a generation afterwards, Hutu parents refused to send their children to school.

Restoring trust in the national education system in order to get buy-in for the new civics curriculum meant rebuilding trust between teachers and administrators and the national ministry. The project team worked with the Ministry officials and the regional education officers to focus on this task.

**This required a series of small steps, each one demonstrating, that the Ministry had (a) understood the administrators' and teachers' fears about introducing something new into the community; (b) demonstrated the ability to bring the right resources to the table; and (c) demonstrated their willingness to provide support throughout the project's implementation, reassuring the school officials that they would not be abandoned should problems arise. In other words, the Ministry had to build 'strategic trust' with the school administrators and teachers before the latter two would fully engage with the new program.**

The process began by reinforcing the relationships amongst the Ministry's key partners (including the teacher's union, local government officials, parliamentarians, and other officials from the Ministry of Education) and having them publicly declare their support for the innovative new conflict-management module. If these higher-level officials demonstrated their commitment to the content, then the school administrators and teachers would have more confidence in their later support for the new curriculum and its implementation.

The project team started by offering a training module on collaborative decision-making targeted at the policy makers and line personnel of these institutions. This was the same content that would later be adapted for and integrated into the civics curriculum.

Next, this group, under the direction of the Minister, nominated a small team located within the Ministry to support the development of the training program, the elaboration of the conflict-management curriculum, and the evaluation of both the curriculum and the overall project. Finally, school administrators across Burundi were consulted about the design of the training-of-teachers pilot program and were able to nominate teachers to participate. Throughout this incremental process, the Minister was able to demonstrate that he understood the interests of the teachers and administrators; that he had the ability to address those interests; and that the political will existed to carry the project forward. He built strategic trust with the school administrators and teachers, which in turn gave them confidence to join the effort and to experiment with the new civics curriculum.

# Using The Strategic Trust Tool

*In the weeks following the Head of School's conversation with the board member, he had conversations with a dozen members of the Legacy community.*

The aim of these conversations was to better understand where community members stood on APs and why there seemed to be islands of resentment growing amongst the faculty. In response to what he learned, the Head of School took time at a faculty meeting to acknowledge that he understood concerns had been brewing for some time without being addressed. He reported what he had learned from his conversations with faculty and in so doing, he demonstrated understanding of their interests (e.g., that the college admission process seemed to be playing too big a role in curricular decisions; that the atmosphere of the school had deteriorated; that there was a desire to support healthy learning and being habits among students; and that faculty wanted to inform the decision-making process about the elimination of AP courses).

Trust Factor Assessment	Our Strategic Trust in Them	Their Strategic Trust in Us
UNDERSTANDING	Their understanding of our interests	Our demonstrated understanding of their interests
ABILITY	Their ability to address our interests	Our demonstrated ability to address their interests
WILL	Their will to act in our interests	Our demonstrated will to act in their interests
WHEN ANY FACTOR = 0, STRATEGIC = 0!		

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**The Head of School let the faculty know that the next faculty meeting would be dedicated to examining the following question: "How are the college search and application processes negatively impacting teaching and learning and the wellbeing of students and faculty?"**

He also let them know that he was appointing a task force to research the question of whether or not to eliminate APs, the consequences of doing so, and other issues related to the negative impact of the college application process on the learning environment. This action demonstrated the Head of School's ability to address the issue. The task force would be comprised of a diverse range of stakeholders. Faculty who wanted to serve were encouraged to put their names forward. The task force would spend most of the next semester researching the issues and then formulating

a list of recommendations, including whether or not to eliminate AP courses. Those recommendations would go to the Head of School, who would make the final decision and would work with the task force on implementation. Together with the faculty, the Head of School set out a timeline for this process along with benchmarks for ensuring that the decision would be taken in a timely manner. This plan demonstrated the Head of School's desire to act in the best interests of students and faculty.

**The Head of School demonstrated understanding, ability, and willingness to work with the faculty on this critical decision-making process, effectively rebuilding trust with them and the broader Legacy School community — successfully laying the ground for this and future decisions.**

## The Ladder of Inference

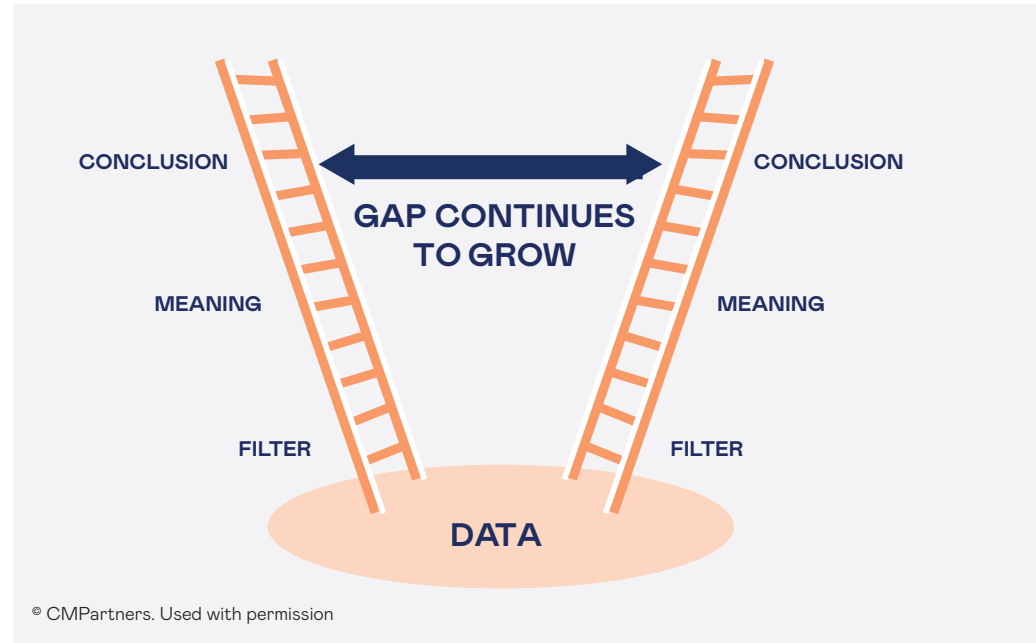
*It is all well and good to suggest that the Head of School build Strategic Trust, yet how can that conversation get started in such a fraught environment?*

If the stakeholders are stuck on their positions and distrustful of the other parties, what tools or skills might the Head of School use to engage this dialogue most effectively?

The final tool that can help the Head of School approach this thorny issue is the Ladder of Inference (the Ladder). A concept originally developed in 1970 by Chris Argyris at Harvard Business School, the Ladder helps to elucidate how we take a set of data (something we see or experience in the world), filter it through our past experience, assign meaning to it, and then draw conclusions — all within seconds!

**When we are talking about something we agree on, that does not pose a problem; humans speak at the level of conclusions all the time. In fact, we need our past experience to make sense of the world.**

*I look outside and see the sun shining (the data); in the fall in the Northeast, the temperatures increase to a pleasant level when the sun comes out (the filter); sunny days result in perfect Fall weather (the meaning);*



*"It's a beautiful day!" (conclusion: the only part of this process that we actually share with the other person!).*

However, when we are having a conversation about an issue that is fraught with emotion or may trigger negative reactions, then this process becomes dangerous, potentially aggravating an already difficult dynamic.

*You are my colleague and we have had a recent argument about a political issue. I later see you cut in line at the lunch room (the data); people who don't agree with me politically are insensitive (the filter); you have just demonstrated your insensitivity by cutting in front of the line (the meaning); "You are so rude!" (the conclusion).*

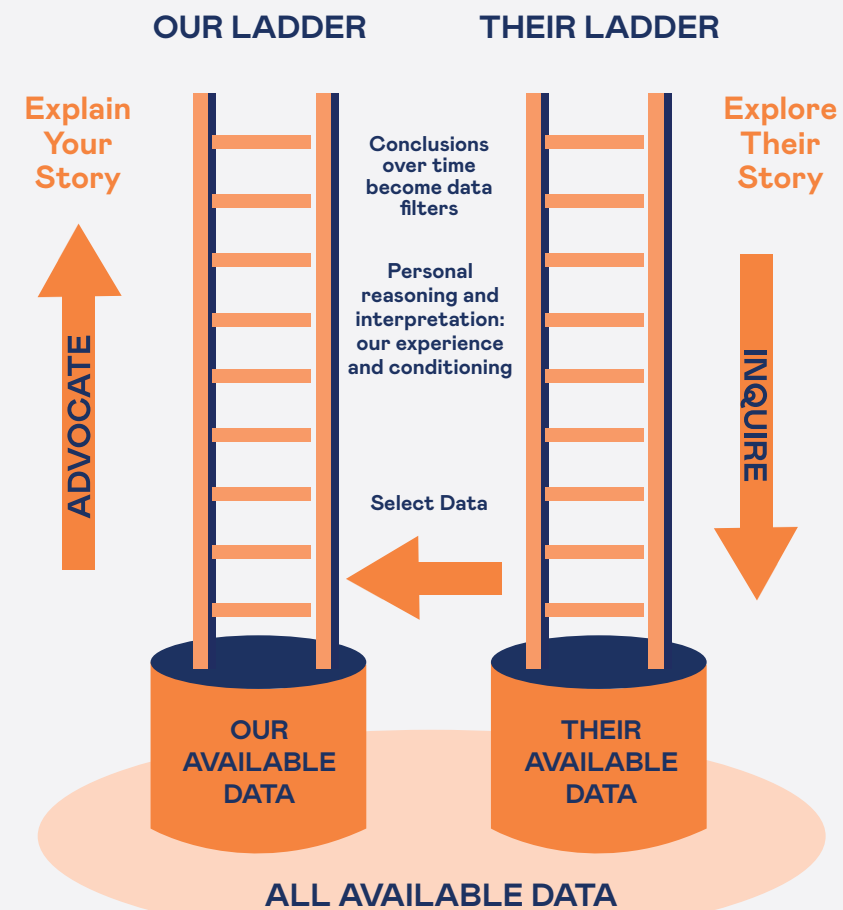
In a difficult conversation, our conclusions risk becoming operating assumptions (untested beliefs about the other person or about the way the world works), which then serve to filter future data that we see or experience in

the world. The danger is that we treat these untested operating assumptions as "fact." The more difficult or challenging the conversation, the more likely we are to ignore any disconfirming data (for example, the person whom your colleague allegedly cut in front of is smiling and laughing with that colleague) and to only seek out data that confirms our previous assumptions. Our colleague is "rude, that's a fact!" In reaching this position, we have ignored the data that might suggest a different conclusion (e.g., perhaps that person was holding a place in line for your colleague or perhaps they planned to meet for lunch).

That we reach different conclusions as human beings is natural. We see and experience different things. Our filters depend on how we experience the world (are we auditory? visual? kinesthetic?). The meaning we ascribe is informed by our life experience, our religion, our race, gender, upbringing, etc.



## Leading a Learning Conversation



### Objective: Understand First

- Choose, reject, clarify, or persuade after
- Be Aware: Even when we agree, we still see things differently
- Earn the Right to Inquire: Share our purposes, listen actively, discuss trust

### Method: Balance Advocacy with Inquiry

- Acknowledge their views, demonstrate our understanding, test theirs
- Use their ladder (data and reasoning) to inform our advocacy
- Make our Advocacy "testable": Share the experience, interests, and reasoning beneath our conclusions

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The challenge is that we tend to share only our conclusions, not the reasoning and interpretation that underlie them. In addition, we each have our own Ladders of Inference about an issue or situation and the more difficult the conversation, the farther apart we find ourselves once we've reached the top of the Ladder.

In a difficult conversation, this phenomenon leads us to simply trade our conclusions. We advocate for our point of view and expect the other person to "jump" over to the top of our ladder and see things the way we do. Not only does that rarely (if ever!) happen, there is very little learning; learning which might help us to resolve the problem or challenge our assumptions.

**So what to do? Counterintuitively, our advice is to first walk them down their Ladder using an effective inquiry strategy, ask them open-ended questions, and seek to understand their perspective before sharing the data you see, the meaning you've ascribed to that data, and the conclusion you have drawn. Once you have demonstrated that you want to learn about their point of view, they are more likely to listen to you. In addition, with the information that you have learned, you can more effectively advocate for your perspective.**

**[Pélagie] emphasized the benefits of conflict prevention, offering lots of reasons why the curriculum was going to be so beneficial to the schools. The reaction was still negative.**

### *Using the Ladder of Inference to Confront Resistance*

When the Minister sent his team members to get buy-in from the school administrators and teachers for the idea of a new conflict-resolution module, they were met with resistance: “This will never be successful!”

The Minister’s charismatic team member, Pélagie, assumed that the administrators and teachers did not understand what she meant, so she emphasized the benefits of conflict prevention, offering lots of reasons why the curriculum was going to be so beneficial to the schools. The reaction was still negative. Frustrated, Pélagie returned to Bujumbura (Burundi’s capital city), reporting that Burundians were too stuck in their ways and too backward to appreciate this innovative approach. Her conclusion? This project would have to wait another year or two before it would be accepted by the unimaginative school staff.

After consulting with the Bridgeway Group team, the Minister suggested that Pélagie return to the schools and that instead of touting the benefits of the conflict-resolution module, she walk the administrators and teachers ‘down their ladders’. What were their concerns about the new curriculum? Why did they believe that the new civics curriculum would not be successful? Pélagie reluctantly agreed to make the trip back out to the countryside, vowing to use inquiry rather than advocacy as her main strategy of influence.

Upon asking these questions, Pélagie learned that, contrary to her initial conclusion, the administrators were interested in integrating conflict resolution into the civics curriculum. What they were worried about was that the message might not be reinforced at home, with the parents. They wanted to know how parents could be empowered to participate. Without their involvement, the administrators felt the new module could not be successfully implemented. For their part, the teachers shared that they were fearful that a new module would mean that they had to teach yet one more course in an already overburdened school day.

**In addition, as they had not received any materials from the Ministry to teach the other new parts of the civics curriculum — in fact, the only teaching materials they had dated back to before the war! — they were afraid that they would have to make up the exercises for new content that they did not fully understand.**

Given these circumstances, their conclusion was that this idea would never be successful. Once Pélagie better understood how the school administrators and teachers saw the problem, she was able to more effectively target her advocacy. Rather than talk about the general benefits of conflict resolution, she spoke about how the project had anticipated involving communities beyond the school campus and the resources available to offer training to the teachers, and to produce the new teaching materials.

**While not all of their fears and concerns were allayed, the teachers and administrators were far more willing to revise their conclusions about the project and to join the pilot program.**

## Using the Ladder of Inference

*At the Legacy School, all members of the task force were trained in using the Ladder of Inference. Following the training, they conducted scores of short 15-20 minute interviews with a broad array of stakeholders.*

One person they interviewed summed up the problem in a way that resonated with many members of the faculty: “The biggest barrier to innovation and experimentation at this school is the insanity of the college admissions process driving everything. We’re not allowed to do our best teaching because of the APs. We can do far better if given the chance.”

The interviews also revealed a faculty that was feeling more and more disengaged and resentful because there were no real mechanisms for them to be meaningfully involved in helping set the direction of the school. This learning was a surprise to the Head of School, who had assumed that the faculty had given up on the Legacy School, causing him to reevaluate his assessment of their commitment and revise his conclusions about their willingness to contribute to Legacy’s future.

The task force interviews also revealed that the Director of Admissions, Director of Marketing, and the Business Manager were all nervous about the notion of eliminating APs because they have been central to how the school has communicated its quality to prospective families. Without APs, they would need to rethink how to position themselves in the market so that they could continue to enroll the best students in the area.

The Director of College Admission said that although they were given the go-ahead to eliminate the APs by the Ivies and other highly competitive colleges and universities, that was predicated on offering rigorous courses to replace them and currently those courses didn’t exist.

With each constituency, the task force was able to use the Ladder of Inference to get underneath the conclusions: “We can’t eliminate the APs!” or “The APs are critical to our success!”

They emerged from the process not only with a better understanding of everyone’s interests, but also a clearer sense of the data on which their conclusions were based and how each one had interpreted that data. Armed with this understanding, the task force was better prepared to develop a more effective decision-making process to deal with the question of keeping the APs.



**The biggest barrier to innovation and experimentation at this school is the insanity of the college admissions process driving everything.”**

## The Results

**By using the Stakeholder Mapping Tool, the Strategic Trust Tool, and the Ladder of Inference, the Head of School was able to craft a decision-making process to address the AP question that the Legacy Community not only accepted but embraced.**

### **The School eliminated APs.**

The task force discovered that the faculty felt APs had become a proxy for a broader set of issues connected with the college application process. Ultimately the task force recommended eliminating APs over a three-year period. Last in line for elimination would be AP math and language courses since teachers of those subjects did not feel the APs were as problematic to their broader curriculum goals as teachers of other subjects. The Head of School accepted the recommendation of the task force and then went to the board with the news. Because so much work had gone into assessing interests and uncovering concerns, the Head was prepared for some board pushback but ultimately was able to move the group to see that dropping APs was the best move. The Head of School then carefully communicated the case for elimination in person, in writing, even through a podcast, to faculty, students, parents, alums, and prospective families and teachers.

### **Time and financial support were provided for new course design**

To address the loss of APs in the course roster, a fund was developed — funded by two trustees — to financially support faculty who wanted to design new courses over the summer as well as during the academic year.

### **The School hired a Director of Institutional Assessment and Research**

Because there was some concern that Legacy had a tendency to make significant changes and then fail to assess whether they worked, a consultant was hired to help the school measure the results of the changes they put in place. The consultant collected data on college matriculations, student and faculty well-being, and indices of deeper learning, and then worked with faculty to make meaning of the results. The consultant proved so important in helping the administration and faculty think about their work that the school recently hired a Director of Institutional Assessment and Research.

### **College Admissions Compact and Challenge**

Several teachers, the school psychologist, the Director of Parent Programs, and the Director of College Counseling created a College Search Challenge inspired by the SchoolFamily College Admissions Compact designed by Harvard's Making Caring Common project. The Compact is a set of commitments that each constituency agrees to in order to lower the stress of the college admissions process and to broaden the notion of what constitutes a good match college/university. Legacy's Compact is disseminated to all students, parents, and faculty members and every fall there is a campaign to get members, of each stakeholder group to sign it. The campaign is celebratory in nature.

### **Programming series for parents on reducing excessive achievement pressure**

A programming series was developed to help parents reduce excessive achievement pressure on their children. The school drew heavily from Dr. Denise Pope's work and the Challenge Success program out of Stanford. The programming was made available to non-Legacy parents and resulted in increased community goodwill for the school. In addition, parents, students, faculty, and board members were invited to read a book in common and join discussion groups. One book on the list was *Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic and What We Can Do About It* by Jennifer Brehehy Wallace.

### **Reframed messaging on rigor and quality**

The Head of School worked in concert with the Director of Marketing and the Director of Admission on reframing the school's messaging around rigor and success to move the institution away from relying on its AP results as the major sign that it was successfully educating students. This new messaging has made its way into the website and digital and print materials.

Legacy School still has changes to make to help their students and faculty thrive. At the same time, faculty morale has improved considerably and the pressure cooker atmosphere at the school has started to cool. The next big task will be overhauling the schedule, something that many predicted would never happen because they couldn't conceive of how such a daunting and complex task could be accomplished.

The Head of School has already ensured that all administrators and department heads have been trained on using the Stakeholder Mapping Tool, the Strategic Trust Tool, and the Ladder of Inference, and he has plans to train the rest of the faculty as well. He is also planning on training students in their use so that the entire community can have a common language and set of tools to engage on thorny issues.

**In hindsight, the Head of School realized that not engaging with the faculty did not make the problem go away, but in fact made it far more difficult to find resolution. By employing the right tools, an institution riddled with distrust and resentment was able to hit the reset button and address the tough challenges. Instead of shirking from complex problems, there is now a shared belief that as a community they have the ability to design effective and practical responses and solutions to the challenges that confront them.**

*This report was co-written with: The Bridgeway Group, a Massachusetts-based non-profit firm that offers facilitation, training, coaching, and strategic advisory services in negotiation, communication, and peacebuilding skills to individuals and organizations worldwide.*





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