



The Secrets to Collaborative IEP Meetings

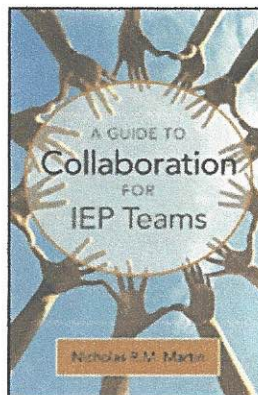
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"When people have a chance to share their thoughts and feelings in a safe and respectful environment, they do great and often surprising things together," says Nicholas R.M. Martin, a conflict resolution consultant and director of The Center for Accord. With this idea in mind, Martin shares his advice on how to turn IEP meetings into productive, team efforts.

The Secrets to Collaborative IEP Meetings

Navigating your way through an IEP meeting can be like walking through a minefield. Negative feelings can lead to not only an unpleasant experience, but also an unproductive one that doesn't perform its primary function—to devise a plan that best meets a child's needs. To help you and the people you work with to reach this goal, Nicholas R.M. Martin shares his thoughts and insights.



Brookes Publishing: *What is your vision of an ideal IEP team?*

Nicholas Martin: An ideal IEP team simply lives the clear intention of IDEA: that it be a decision-making partnership between schools and parents for the benefit of children. This partnership has three elements:

- shared information—about the child's educational needs and the available resources to meet them,
- shared decision making—about the options that will best address those educational needs, and
- shared implementation—assuring timely and professional follow through with the decisions made by the team

While very simple in vision, this partnership is not always easy to manifest in practice. It requires a great deal of awareness, professionalism, and dedication on the part of all members of the IEP team.

At the same time, the vast majority of bad feelings, contentiousness, and difficulties that surface in the IEP environment are almost always rooted in a deviation or perceived deviation from this very simple vision of partnership. Parents may not attend IEP meetings if they don't see themselves as equal partners in the support of their children's education; teachers may show resistance to IEPs if they do not comfortably accept their roles as partners in special education; administrators may see special education as being of lower standing among their many responsibilities and priorities; and resource professionals may shrink from full partnership if they feel overwhelmed by more than they can handle. And quite apart from any of these is the oppositional stance people often take when they perceive others to have stepped out of the ring of partnership (even if they haven't)!

It is easy to see what teamwork has to look like in professional sports for any team to thrive and succeed against its obstacles, whatever they may be. Many of these same success-promoting features are required for real professionalism in parent-school partnerships, as well. These include commitment to a similar vision, willingness to give one's best—and to continually upgrade one's abilities through practice and training—and willingness to put the team's objectives ahead of one's personal feelings and individual objectives. Simply holding the vision of "a team approach for the well-being of the child" will invariably go far toward assuring the efficiency, harmony, and success of any IEP team.

BP: *How should team members plan for a successful IEP meeting?*

NM: A favorite ditty I heard many years ago is, "When we are ready to cross a threshold—any threshold—the crossing itself comes very easily." The way team members can plan for a successful meeting is really an important question because what happens before a meeting can have as much to do with the success of the meeting as whatever is said or done at the meeting itself. This question of planning can be answered in two ways—first from a general perspective and then from a more specific perspective.

Generally speaking, what helps any meeting (IEP or not) be successful is that the participants arrive on time, to a comfortable setting, prepared for whatever tasks must be completed, holding clear and shared expectations, with mutual respect and a positive attitude. Easy to say, perhaps, but the question then becomes how exactly to apply these broad generalizations to the IEP environment specifically.

In this regard, I have been fortunate to have the input of many hundreds of school professionals for whom the question of best practices, including preparation, is a standard topic of discussion at my workshops. The themes that school personnel invariably emphasize include:

1. **Attitude:** a spirit of mutual respect for all members of the team and of dedication to the work of the team. Such an attitude is obviously of critical importance among the team members

themselves and yet must also extend to those others who support the work of the team—the teachers, parents, school staff, advocates, and administrators who may not be participating in the meetings themselves.

2. **Training:** for all team members in the laws, policies, procedures, and obligations of the IEP team. Without adequate training, participants will surely be limited in the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to manifest the idealistic vision of IDEA. Also worth noting is that without adequate training, the IEP team participants will come with differing expectations, and these serve as key elements in many of the disagreements and hard feelings that could otherwise be minimized, avoided, and more easily resolved.
3. **Communication:** making sure all members are clear about the time and place of the meeting, what will be covered, and what each of them, individually, will be asked to contribute toward the information-gathering and decision-making aspects of the meeting. Communication will also be of critical importance when it comes to assuring collaboration leading into consensus, as well as diplomatically handling the many challenges that can easily surface during meetings.
4. **Administrative Support:** the assistance of those in authority, especially principals and superintendents, so as to make it as easy as reasonably possible for teams to fulfill their legal obligations. Administrative support is vital in many ways, and without the support of those in authority, it is often very difficult for IEP teams to do what is required of them. Conversely, when teams have the support and assistance of those "in command," morale, efficiency, training, funding, and so many of the factors necessary for success fall more easily into place for everyone's benefit, especially the children.

BP: *What place do emotions have in IEP meetings?*

NM: This is a wonderful question and reminds me of the role of water in the life of a fish. The fish may not spend a lot of time studying water or even appreciating it, and yet his existence is totally dependent on it. Similarly, and acknowledging this as a broad generalization, we humans spend very little time recognizing, appreciating, or truly understanding the role of emotions in our lives.

As a dispute mediator and as a former psychotherapist, I can say with complete conviction that emotions are the central driving force in almost every aspect of our human experience. To say or think, "This is an IEP meeting, so let's not get emotional," sounds very wise on the surface, and yet we are at all times feeling beings. Our emotions always reflect our thinking and then animate our behavior. What each and every team member does at each and every IEP meeting will always relate to what they are feeling on an emotional level.

As examples, whether I as a parent even attend an IEP meeting will depend on whether I feel comfortable to do so. Whether a teacher

takes the time to prepare for a meeting will depend on whether he feels committed to being there. Whether an administrator clears her schedule to allow uninterrupted time for the meeting will depend on whether it feels important to her to do so.

Emotions can also be seen as the root of every single conflict that ever existed in the IEP environment. In every due process hearing, in every mediation, in every formal complaint, it is such feelings as mistrust, anger, fear, and frustration that are the invisible "threads that run so true." Because it is not against the law to feel bad, we don't talk to the hearing officer about our painful feelings—instead we build complex cases in the language of the law (and spend lots of time and money doing so). And yet dissatisfied parents invariably point to other factors that, if left unchecked, take the form of these unfortunate, costly, and unnecessary legal actions.

The bottom line is that the parents feel badly, and unless school personnel can open meaningful channels for the discussion and resolution of bad feelings, they can be sure that those feelings are going to go somewhere else—often toward empty chairs at the IEP table, weakening of the partnership vision, or to the three prescribed avenues of legal recourse (hearings, complaints, and mediations).

The good news, however, is that emotions are very predictable, very easy to understand, and very easy to resolve when we simply decide it is important to do so and know how to get the process started.

BP: *What steps should IEP members do when they feel stuck on an issue?*

NM: The first thing that people can do when they feel stuck is to acknowledge it to themselves and to the others involved. The second is then to become curious about what it is that has gotten them into such a fix.

For example, if I am at a standstill with my IEP team, do I feel stuck because I feel hopeless (maybe I need some new encouragement or some new awareness of available options)? Do I feel stuck because I feel discounted and ignored by my team (maybe if they knew how I felt, they would respond in a way that shows that they care)? Or do I feel stuck because I don't have what I need to make my decisions (more information from additional testing, expert advice, or just time to think things over would help me move forward once again)?

As soon as I know what I feel and what perceptions are shaping my feelings, I am already halfway through. Then, by sharing my experience diplomatically and with respect to the others involved, effective communication will be the very key that both resolves my feelings and opens the doors to resolving the situation that troubles me (or my perceptions about it). The one absolute requirement, however, is a team spirit committed to such open and supportive communication. Given awareness and communication in an environment of mutual respect, success can invariably be assured.

BP: *When all else fails and it becomes evident that agreement will not be reached during a meeting, how should IEP members*

proceed?

NM: Let's begin by closely examining what it means to say "when all else fails." It is important to recognize how frequently people can draw this conclusion when it really isn't true! We have never failed until we have done all we can, and we have rarely done all we can until we have first done all we are willing and, second, have done what we can with the necessary level of skill. Willingness and skill are the dynamic duo—with them, we as human beings can do great things, and without them, we are doomed.

Well, okay, let's assume that we have in fact done everything possible with positive attitudes, with great skill, and with full willingness on the part of all members to resolve our differences for the benefit of the children (whew—how often do we really do that?). Assuming that we really have, we can now talk about the other term for "stuckness" used by negotiators: "fatal impasse."

What I am about to say comes from lawsuits—from mediation of disputes in the legal arena—yet the implications fit very well at IEP meetings and in any settings where we just can't seem to see eye to eye.

First, let's clarify what we are stuck about and what the source of the hold up is. We may be thinking "we can't get this IEP done" when in fact such thinking is needlessly broad. Perhaps there are many issues that have been agreed upon, and we can at least narrow the points in dispute. Perhaps we have agreed on the reading level, the services needed, and the assistive technology that would be helpful for the particular child.

Where we get stuck, however, is on the issue of whether this IEP can be implemented in the general classroom. I say yes, you say no, and we are already flipping through the rolodex for the number of the nearest lawyer. I can't demand a hearing because I feel discounted, and you can't request one just because you're frustrated with me, so instead we go to a hearing over "denial of FAPE in an LRE." Whoa, Nellie!

In the above example, we have greatly narrowed the points in dispute. As a team, we now have a number of choices: further discussion after time to think; further discussion after additional testing or consulting with experts; or perhaps a trial period for the student in the general classroom, subject to review if it doesn't work out. There are always options, and usually many more than we realize. And if all else still fails, we can then resort to the ace up the negotiation sleeve: we can "make agreements about the disagreements."

Perhaps we can agree to let the special education director consult with the district's attorney and advise us after she has had a chance to do so. We could request mediation and give a neutral third party a chance to help us reach consensus—most of the time, they really can!

Of course, we could also agree to take the issue of the special education setting and put just this one point before a hearing officer. I would never suggest we dispense with that option, but I would always emphasize how unnecessary and expensive it usually is—and who does it benefit?

What is consistently demonstrated by the very high success and satisfaction rates for mediation, and what I have seen again and again in my own experience, is this: When people have a chance to share their thoughts and feelings in a safe and respectful environment, they do great and often surprising things together.

Face it, folks, people are awesome. Kids are awesome (all educators know that), and what are grown ups except big kids (all shrinks know that). And for this reason, the simple answer to the question of fatal impasse is: Talk. And if that fails: Talk some more. And if talking doesn't fix it, then get help talking. Talk is cheap. It is also powerful stuff!

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