

FOREWORD BY AMANDA RIPLEY,
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *HIGH CONFLICT*

ROBERT FERSH
MARIAH LEVISON

From
Conflict *to*
Convergence

COMING TOGETHER
to SOLVE TOUGH
PROBLEMS

WILEY

“Often, it can feel like our problems are intractable. Rob Fersh and Mariah Levison demonstrate that it doesn’t need to be that way. They explain why overcoming division is vital to solving problems and help readers understand why they need the mindset—the will—for constructive engagement as well as the building blocks and process—the skills—to move forward productively. Their hopeful, well-written, and engaging book provides a roadmap for anyone with an appetite for collaborative problem-solving.”

—**Congressman Derek Kilmer**

“Through creative storytelling, the authors walk us through practical steps to find shared solutions that might seem impossible. It should be required reading for all our elected officials! The long-term impact of this book should influence how those making policy can deploy this experience in these days where, as the authors say, we need to look across the aisle and not see enemies but partners for change.”

—**Margery Kraus**, Founder and Executive Chairman, APCO

“As a conservative in the policy world I learned long ago that for true reform to be achieved and sustained we must be willing to listen, and try to understand each other’s values, goals, and perspectives. Helping strange bedfellows to do that is what Convergence does. In this book, Fersh and Levison share the techniques that produce success.”

—**Stuart Butler**, Senior Fellow in Economic Studies,
Brookings Institution, and former director of the
Center for Policy Innovation, The Heritage Foundation

“Conflict is all around us and cripples our urgent efforts to respond to urgent threats to our climate and communities. This book uniquely combines research on collaborative responses to the problems of the commons with practical mindsets, skills, and tools to practice collaborative problem-solving in a wide array of settings. Strongly recommended for instructors committed to using real-world applications of effective collective problem-solving.”

—**Lawrence R. Jacobs**, Director, Center for the Study of Politics
and Governance, University of Minnesota

“As a growing lack of trust in institutions and each other threatens to destabilize societies across the globe, Levison and Fersh have given all of us a major and timely gift. They make the case we can achieve more durable and wise solutions to any number of thorny problems by opting out of the zero-sum game of competing interests, and instead turning toward each other. Even better, their book walks us through exactly how to value and work across our differences.”

—**John A. Powell**, Director, Othering and Belonging Institute; Robert D. Haas Chancellor’s Chair in Equity and Inclusion, University of California–Berkeley

“I’ve been involved with Convergence since Day One and sat as a stakeholder in one of its projects. People of widely divergent backgrounds and viewpoints, including political perspectives, can put these ideas to use to solve problems effectively without compromising principles important to them. Now more than ever we need to find ways to constructively and respectfully engage with others to solve problems where differences stand in the way of progress. This is the way.”

—**Kelly D. Johnston**, Former Food Lobbyist;
28th Secretary of the US Senate

“If you have thrown up your hands and decided there’s no way to talk to or understand ‘the other,’ don’t give up just yet. The path forward is in this book. Insightful, easy to read, and packed with memorable stories, this book shows the authors’ advice in action and inspires you to give it a try yourself. The perfect book at the perfect time on how to resolve our differences with respect for each other’s humanity.”

—**Linda Lorelle**, Journalist and Entrepreneur;
Host of *Our Voices Matter* Podcast

“Drawing upon decades of personal experience, Levison and Fersh have produced an accessible and practical toolkit for people who want to solve problems, not simply argue about them. Using examples stretching back to the Constitutional Convention through to their own frontline experience with modern debates, Levison and Fersh demonstrate that a healthier, happier, more just America is entirely available to us.”

—**Shamil Idriss**, CEO, Search for Common Ground

“The farther removed the ‘other’ is from our own dinner table, the harder it is to navigate conflicting ideas. Yet if we cannot find ways to bridge our conflicts, our democracy will fail. That’s why this book—outlining a step-by-step procedure for finding convergence around solutions to our most serious problems—is absolutely essential.”

—**Mickey Edwards**, Former Congressman; Lecturer at Princeton School of Public and International Affairs

“*From Conflict to Convergence* is a thoughtful guide for anyone seeking to forge lasting solutions to tough problems in a polarized world. Drawing on sound research and their extensive experience, Fersh and Levison offer practical strategies for fostering collaboration among people with different perspectives—a requirement for tackling the greatest challenges in society today.”

—**Brian Hooks**, Chairman and CEO, Stand Together

“In this much-needed book, two experienced practitioners show that even in times of intense polarization, ‘collaborative problem-solving’ can produce agreement on difficult questions. As I can attest from personal experience, the process requires patience, trust-building among longtime opponents, and the willingness to consider new evidence and unfamiliar arguments. It’s more than a feel-good exercise, because it can lead to breakthroughs that improve the lives of millions of Americans.”

—**Bill Galston**, Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution

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For my sons, Soren and Everett. May they and their peers grow up in a world that recognizes that we all have so much in common, that the differences we do have are a source of strength, and that solutions are wiser when they meet the needs of all involved.

And for my beloved husband, Kyle, and my wonderful former boss, Commissioner Josh Tilsen, each of whom, in very different ways, played an essential part in the creation of this book.

—Mariah Levison

Above all, to two women who have had the greatest influence on my life—To my late mother, Blanche Fersh, who did so much to instill in me the values that guide my life. And to my extraordinary wife, Sharon Markus, who has been an indispensable partner in leading our lives true to those values.

And to my dear children and their partners and children, with the humble hope this book will contribute in some small way to a better world for them.

—Rob Fersh

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Foreword

Wherever I go as a reporter, I meet Americans who are exhausted by our politics and yearning for something different. I see it in school board meetings, churches, statehouses, newsrooms, and libraries. I see it when people come up to me with tears in their eyes to talk about estrangements in their families, alienation from their neighbors, fears for their children, and public problems that never seem to get solved.

This longing is *intense*. And here's the irony: almost everyone, from all sides, cares deeply about the country and the future, and they desperately want another, less excruciating way of being in conflict.

So why, I often wonder, don't they have more options? The demand for a less poisonous civic life is skyrocketing. And yet this craving is utterly unfulfilled. Isn't that a little odd?

I know, of course, that there are many forces that benefit from our intractable conflicts, financially and psychologically. There is an entire outrage industrial complex that feeds and perpetuates our current culture of fear and blame.

But it's also true that we live in one of the world's most open and competitive marketplaces for ideas and innovation. America contains literally millions of risk takers and storytellers, thinkers and advocates. We are not afraid to try new things, and we are nothing if not opportunistic.

So why don't we have better options by now?

One reason (among many others), I think, is that we have a lot of people *talking* about the need for a more dignified way to disagree, and almost no one *showing* us what that looks like. We are inundated with examples of dysfunctional conflict in our news and social media feeds, but we have very few examples of what *functional* conflict looks like. The examples we do get tend to be poorly told and forgettable. In this void, it can feel like our only choice is to join the melee—or withdraw from the arena altogether.

That's why it is so important what Mariah Levison and Rob Fersh have tried to do with this book. They have chronicled vivid examples of Americans who have met their enemies face to face and done something radically different. And, just as importantly, they have given us a clear guide to creating useful conflict like this in our own organizations and towns. The emotions are unvarnished and believable; the methodology is specific and doable. We need more examples like this—where Americans share raw truths about what happens when we break free from the trance of polarization and dare to get things done. I hope everyone who reads this book will share their own stories far and wide, so we can finally imagine what might be.

—Amanda Ripley
Best-selling author of *High Conflict*,
Co-founder of Good Conflict,
Columnist for the *Washington Post*

Introduction

How do we treat each other across our differences? Is it with derision, dismissal, or avoidance? Or is it with respect, decency, and engagement whenever possible? We believe the path to better solutions and a better society will virtually always be found through respectful dialogue. Whether you're addressing festering family issues, workplace disagreements, thorny community decisions, or contentious public policy challenges, we have enormous—and, in too many cases, unrealized—potential for resolving problems, large and small.

Having differences of opinion, including those that lead to conflict, is a normal part of human life. The world would be a boring and far less productive place if we all thought the same things. Disagreement can be a big positive, producing a creative tension that elevates thinking to a new level. Especially when aired respectfully, disagreements can broaden our horizons and generate new understanding and insights.

When disagreement leads to conflict, however, problems can arise if we're not skillful in how we deal with them. While not all conflicts can be resolved amicably, this book is about how we can handle conflict and disagreement constructively in our personal and public lives to address problems and find breakthrough solutions. The main challenge we face in an increasingly divided world is not that conflict exists, but rather in how we think about and respond to it.

COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Thankfully, we've seen firsthand that there's a proven way to approach conflict more effectively. This approach not only reduces unnecessary strife but also creates better solutions to tough problems by having

people come together to find obscured areas of genuine agreement without compromising principles. The approach is called collaborative problem-solving, and we've spent much of our careers supporting people to employ its power.

Collaborative problem-solving addresses conflicts and issues by bringing together the collective knowledge, experience, and influence of the people needed to solve a problem, including those who are in strong disagreement, and convening them in a dialogue designed to elicit rich and respectful exchanges on the issues at hand. These conversations create a community of concern and a culture of respect that often lead to agreement on a set of solutions that meets the most important needs of everyone taking part. Having shaped the solutions, having a stake in their success, and knowing that the solutions have broad support, more often than not, motivates the participants to put the solutions into effect. It also generally results in ongoing collaboration over time.

One special benefit of collaborative problem-solving is that it can have an impact right away. It can help to arrest a downward slide toward increased division, hopelessness, and gridlock by increasing the number of people who, despite major differences in background and perspective, can work together effectively. While some conflicts, such as those dealing with fundamental differences in identity or religious belief, can be especially tricky to resolve, most conflict is driven by honest disagreement about things people care about and by our inability to navigate those differences well. When people see they can work well together, the experience has a unique ability to heal wounds and divisions. Communication gets better and people form bonds through the experience of accomplishing something together, like a sports team.

The importance of learning how to collaborate effectively is heightened today as more and more people have less exposure to other points of view. Increasingly people choose to live, work, worship, and play mostly or only in places where others are likely to think like them. And because we all choose our own information sources, many of us have no familiarity with even entirely reasonable points of view held by people who see the world differently.

FROM CONFLICT TO CONVERGENCE

We're practitioners of what we preach. Since the early 2000s, we've both been directly involved in projects around challenging national, state, and community issues where collaborative problem-solving was the gateway to shared solutions and joint action. We've worked on tough issues in the public domain, ranging from elementary and secondary education to the selection of public art; from rising rates of obesity and diabetes to long-term care for elderly and disabled persons; from police–community relations to tribal treaty rights; from increased economic mobility for lower-income people to improved reentry programs after time in prison. In these and many other cases, the fundamental mindsets, building blocks, and process steps of the collaborative problem-solving approach led to new ways of working together and addressing the issues.

Mariah has spent her entire career facilitating conversations across differences, first among individuals and communities at several non-profit dispute resolution centers, then for ten years leading the Minnesota Office of Collaboration and Dispute Resolution, where she worked on local, state, and tribal governmental issues. In 2022, she joined the Convergence Center for Policy Resolution. There she now focuses primarily on national issues.

Early on, Mariah recognized that people's poor behavior in conflicts was, in almost every case, a misguided attempt to fulfill one of their basic human needs—security, dignity, or belonging. Like a child who acts out to gain attention, adults do things like unquestioningly accepting bad ideas to remain part of a group that helps them meet their need for belonging, or lashing out at a colleague when they feel the person's feedback threatens their sense of competency. This key insight led her to realize that most conflicts, from the interpersonal to the international, could be solved by finding ways to meet the most important needs of everyone involved. This set her on a course to facilitate people's ability to understand others' core needs and develop solutions that integrate as many of those needs as possible.

For Rob, who started his career decades before Mariah, the work to solve big problems collaboratively came at mid-career. He had already

spent over two decades as an advocate working on national policy issues. For a long time, he believed his “side” held the truth, and it was his job to get others to see the world the way he did. But at heart, he is a mediator, and his bipartisan work for congressional committees as well as his experience leading a national group working to end hunger in the US reinforced this instinct. These experiences exposed him to the decency and thoughtfulness of countless people who did not see the world in the way he did. In particular, working closely in the US Senate with Bob Dole (R-KS) and Patrick Leahy (D-VT), and then in the House of Representatives with Leon Panetta (D-CA) and Bill Emerson (R-MO), Rob broke through the stereotypes he held about people whose orientation to policy issues did not match his own. As time went on, Rob became convinced that no one side or perspective held all the answers. He became increasingly aware of the limits of what he knew, and the limits of *any* orthodoxy or ideology, to provide complete answers. It became important to him always to hear the “other side” of policy arguments because virtually everyone had something valuable to add.

These experiences led Rob to believe that something was missing from our capacities as a nation to take on issues of consequence: the ability to skillfully integrate the wisdom and experience of people with differing backgrounds and vantage points. While various task forces and other entities had successfully resolved differences on an ad hoc basis in the past, these efforts tended to be episodic, and very few people and groups were systematically applying the best available techniques for collaborative problem-solving to a wide array of problems. Building on the work of organizations like the Consensus Building Institute, the North Dakota Consensus Council, and the Montana Consensus Council, Rob brought together a politically diverse set of colleagues to establish a new organization that could systematically take on major national issues where divisions and disagreements stood in the way of progress. After successfully incubating this approach at the international conflict transformation organization Search for Common Ground, Rob founded the Convergence Center for Policy Resolution in 2009. Convergence’s approach and experience animate many of the unique, firsthand stories shared in this book.

We’re often asked about the “magic” or “secret sauce” of what we do at Convergence and our wider work as collaborative problem-solvers.

This book is intended to demystify the magic and let our secrets out of the bag.

We want to share our approach because we passionately believe that widespread employment of collaborative problem-solving can lead to a more civil and functional world. Taken to scale, it can be an important antidote to the deepening divides in civic culture. Collaborative problem-solving is a powerful and proven response to the growing doubts in the US and elsewhere that people who see things differently can work cooperatively to achieve important gains.

THE WORK AHEAD

Although it reflects the findings of leading researchers and practitioners, this book is not academic or theoretical. Instead, it's offered as a story-driven roadmap for using collaborative problem-solving in a wide range of settings to successfully understand and integrate differences in viewpoints and temperaments. We offer practical and flexible ways to help you employ collaborative problem-solving to address issues of concern, grounded largely in our own work and the parallel experiences of others, complemented and supported by relevant science and research. We don't ask you to change your personality or opinions wholesale; that would be in contradiction to the essence of this approach to collaboration. But to do this work well requires intention and practice.

Collaborative problem-solving often requires organizers and participants to move out of their comfort zones to engage people who are very different from, or at odds with, themselves. It takes courage for most people to go into rooms where they know they will meet disagreement. It can be challenging to convene and facilitate conversations that touch a nerve for just about everybody in the room. It also takes courage and open-mindedness to speak with others who know something you don't know, even when you're not in conflict.

You don't need extraordinary skills or talents in mediation or communication to have success with it. Most of us find ways to regularly resolve differences and get on with our lives. In these highly divided times, it's good to remember that many of us continue to work together effectively across differences—in our local communities, our

places of employment, our schools, our houses of worship, and even our seats of government. We should take time to celebrate these demonstrations of our human capacity and desire to collaborate. Belief in this capacity is a vital foundation for putting into practice the mind-sets, building blocks, and process steps that we share in the chapters that follow.

We also believe that collaborative problem-solving isn't an all-or-nothing package. Employing just one of the concepts we present, like nurturing trust or putting relationships at the center of your thinking, can make a remarkable difference in how you work with others. Whether you're a community leader in charge of a public project, a student confronting differences on campus, a manager trying to build a cohesive team, a politician looking for ways to get things done with the other party, or just a citizen concerned about growing divides in the country, our goal is to inspire and equip you to harness the wisdom and benefits of our approach so that you can resolve challenging problems that are critical to you effectively and amicably.

WE CAN DO BETTER

We hope you will take away from this book the fact that collaborative problem-solving is not soft or naïve. It's not a nice-to-have tool to employ on rare occasions, when conditions are right, or when only courteous people are involved. Rather, integrating the fullest range of needs and interests consistently achieves not-otherwise-possible results while also building positive relationships in the process. In turn, these relationships across differences often engender a virtuous cycle of continued collaboration and constructive results. That's the big dividend.

We recognize that collaborative approaches are not appropriate in all instances. It's not necessary or possible to find agreement on every problem, nor can we assure that every individual invited to join a dialogue will participate in good faith. There are times when differences run too deep, or minds are too closed, or potential participants are so ideologically rigid that they cannot participate effectively. Dialogue won't be successful if the people taking part aren't honest or willing to engage. And dialogue may not be an appropriate course if decisions need to be made so expeditiously that there's no time for meaningful

exchange. Indeed, too much collaboration can test the patience of those who need prompt decisions to proceed in their endeavors.

Dialogue works to solve problems in a far wider array of settings and issues than commonly thought possible. No matter how irreconcilably divided we think we are, how much we think we already know the answers ourselves, or how skeptical we are of the “other side,” we can all do a far better job of understanding how other people think; we can all do a far better job of working together to solve problems of mutual concern. Too often, we assume we know how and why others think the way they do and we fail to see the decency and shared aspirations of the people we view as dyed-in-the-wool opponents. Too often we fail to recognize that as smart as we may be, we never hold all the answers for solving tough problems. And too often we react to messengers who may have been strident or unreasonable in how they present their views instead of considering the reasonable arguments and good intentions of those who propose them.

Especially when it comes to public issues, there is a heightened challenge today of finding shared solutions. Many voices in the media and people in positions of power are fanning the flames of conflict, demonizing those who disagree with them, and putting everything in terms of winners and losers (and no one, it goes without saying, wants to be the loser). It may feel like it takes extra energy and effort to be collaborative when so much of the world is combative. Yet, despite deep differences and loud voices, the vast majority of people want to find ways to work together, and they’re able to. Most people prefer to be in positive relationships with others. They want the same fundamental things—security, dignity, opportunity, and community. They may just disagree on how to achieve them.

Ultimately, this book is about how we treat each other and what kind of society we want to have. As modern-day living raises increasingly complex and daunting challenges for each of us to resolve personally, professionally, and in the public domain, the primary barrier to navigating these problems is often relational; it’s when we lose our trust in each other that problems go from hard to seemingly intractable. Creating positive relationships alone will not do the trick but, especially where issues are stuck, it’s often the lubricant needed to get things moving.

This is hard work that's well worth the effort. And maybe, just maybe, as more of us choose to be collaborative problem-solvers, we'll forge more functional, caring, and resilient communities and societies and reach higher ground together.

The Path to Higher Ground

Even when people are deeply divided, it's possible for them to work together to build effective and satisfying solutions to problems.

Those who participate in collaborative problem-solving have more hope and optimism for the future and benefit from finding themselves to be part of a larger circle of care and community. The biggest dividend is the ability, likely more than you've ever imagined, to develop wiser and more enduring solutions to issues that deeply concern you.

Over the years we've found, and polling confirms, that most Americans share key goals—things like free speech (81%), equal justice under law (80%), ensuring everyone has an opportunity to succeed (80%), working together toward the common good (76%), and personal independence and self-reliance (71%).¹ When done right, collaborative problem-solving isn't about splitting the difference among those with conflicting views. It's not about forcing yourself to sit with and compromise with people whose views are so extreme you cannot abide engaging with them. It's about creatively finding higher ground, which entails generating solutions that work for all perspectives of the people involved in pursuing an important goal they share.

We believe you don't need to pick between advocating for a social cause and engaging with others collaboratively. In fact, when a shared

goal can be found, even where there is deep disagreement on how to achieve it, we've seen people use collaborative action to transform their conflict into a constructive opportunity. They *can* find a way to meet the needs of a wide range of people and groups and reduce tensions between sides along the way. It's not about watering down your ideas but rather integrating competing ideas into a shared vision. Having a shared vision can achieve stronger and more durable solutions than any individual or group had at the start.

It's also not about getting people in a room to preserve the status quo and delay change. Done properly, collaborative problem-solving actively seeks out and creates space for divergent perspectives, including those who are ignored, minimized, or undervalued. It embraces the views of those who lean toward keeping the status quo as well as those who are passionate about making change.

It's about raising thinking and generating breakthrough shared solutions that engage the full range of perspectives. Because that's what leads to more effective, longer-lasting problem-solving.

Why Solve Problems Together?

One day in November 2006, during the lunch break of an all-day meeting, Carla Willis grabbed a moment to chat with Rob, one on one.

Carla had been taking part in a series of two-day meetings over two years with leaders from organizations representing the nation's doctors, hospitals, drug manufacturers, insurance companies, employers, consumers, and workers. They were joined by policy experts from left, middle, and right. The formal name of the project was Health Care Coverage for the Uninsured. Sometimes the participants referred to it as the “strange bedfellows on health care” project.¹

They'd all come together to work out how to insure as many Americans as possible who didn't have healthcare coverage, as quickly as possible. Every person at the table had come with their own ideas, interests, assumptions, and proposals. In fact, most of them disagreed, and quite a lot—some for years, others for decades. It had been a long haul. Rob, who was directing the project, had worked with the project team to ensure that the widest possible range of stakeholders were seated at the table. This day marked session number 11.

AGREEING ON THE PROBLEM

At the start, the group agreed on one thing: they were trying to tackle a major challenge. Stuart Butler, then director of domestic policy at the Heritage Foundation, the leading conservative think tank in