

Case Study: Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership

Innovative Facilitation Tools Help Advance Strategic Community Initiatives for Long-term Economic Impact

The Challenge: Collaborate or Evaporate

In 2006, Mary Bula was hired to serve as the sole director for the Growth Partnership division of the Erie (Pennsylvania) Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership (ERCGP). With no additional staff to turn to, Mary knew that success would depend on effectively engaging and leading volunteers from the private sector. She also knew that it was imperative to form strong collaborations with elected officials from various government bodies in order to best address regional challenges and capitalize on opportunities.

The Solution: Use Methods Designed for Innovation to Facilitate Strong, Effective Coalitions

The ERCGP is the voice of the business community around Erie, Pennsylvania, representing more than 800 businesses and organizations in the region. The Growth Partnership division of the ERCGP represents more than 140 Erie area CEOs. Its charge is to pursue three important regional objectives:

- Support a vibrant urban area that is a center for business, retail, home life, entertainment and culture;
- Promote strong public/private partnerships to achieve important regional objectives;
- Support regionalism in whatever forms make sense.

In evaluating how she could best lead the Growth Partnership, Mary identified one skill area that would be critical to success: expert group facilitation. She was aware that people from the private sector think very differently from those working within government agencies, a fact that can cause difficulties, misunderstandings, and delays. But she had faith that these differences could be tapped to strengthen a coalition, rather than hampering its efforts.

Mary decided to develop her facilitation skills by training in methods specifically designed to guide diverse, innovative teams. She chose thinking systems developed by Edward de Bono, the world authority on creative and conceptual thinking, offered by Iowa-based de Bono Consulting, the leading source for de Bono training. Mary's boss and volunteer leadership shared her enthusiasm for this approach to facilitation, giving Mary vital support for her developing plan.

Mary completed intensive Six Thinking Hats® and Focus on Facilitation training in April of 2008. Upon seeing the value of the tools in practice, with help from the de Bono Consulting team, the Chamber then sponsored a two-day, Six Thinking Hats event to grow capacity in the region.

Asked how Mary introduces her innovative facilitation tools to various groups, she explains her approach:

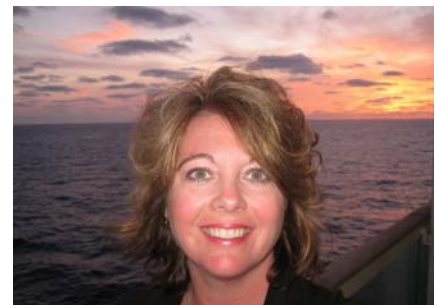
“The Growth Partnership’s role involves facilitating diverse groups representing multiple stakeholders. Many times these groups are comprised of elected officials working alongside CEOs, and they often think very differently. When I work with groups, I always start out by explaining the Six Hats tools and how the framework operates. At times I’ve encountered some skepticism, but now there is such a widespread understanding of the approach locally that with a trained facilitator in the lead, the groups are quickly up and running. It’s such a good way to bring people together. The tools level the playing field, so that we can eliminate conflicts based on power struggles and differing management philosophies. We’re able to consider issues from many points of view, develop alternatives that make sense to everyone, and come up with solutions that everyone can support.”



Erie Pennsylvania

Erie is the 4th largest city in Pennsylvania and its only lake port city. The region's strong manufacturing history has helped encourage recent growth in the healthcare, insurance, tourism, and education industries.

Erie's largest employers are General Electric, Hamot Medical Center, Erie Indemnity Company, St Vincent Health Center, and the state government. New sectors such as data centers and breweries are emerging due to the region's attractive workforce and the availability of fresh water in plentiful quantity and high quality.



Mary Bula, Vice President
Growth Partnership

The Value: Fast Track to Plan and Launch Initiatives

Strengthen Resources to Support ERCGP Program of Work

In mid-2008 the ERCGP launched an internal effort to develop strategies for growing revenue streams for execution over a three-year period. Using the Six Thinking Hats, they developed a “Grow the Business Plan” with action steps, timelines, and responsible parties to improve their products and services and increase dues and non-dues revenues. Within five months they had finished the plan, presented it to the executive committee, and won approval to proceed. The plan now provides them with a detailed road map to achieve their goals.

“We updated this plan in 2009, and we hold at least one session each month to visit the plan and make sure we’re on track,” explains Mary. “In a tough economic climate where member discretionary spending is at risk, our organization has been able to hold its own through stable membership contributions, enhanced program and service revenues, and controlled organizational costs. Our Six Thinking Hats planning efforts were key to this outcome.

“Furthermore, one of the priorities we identified was development and launch of a membership campaign. We held a subsequent Six Thinking Hat session to structure the campaign – a first in years- and that campaign will launch within the next few months.”

Identify the Right Candidates for Committees

Mary uses Six Thinking Hats to identify and vet candidates to serve on various organizational, volunteer board and project-related committees. The process helps them to bring individuals with the right skill sets and other attributes to the table to help move their efforts forward. Thus, innovative thinking systems are used to lay the groundwork for success even before committee meetings begin.

Form High-Potential Public/Private Partnerships: Erie Area Council of Governments (COG)

The Growth Partnership has entered into a partnership with the Erie Area Council of Governments (COG) to enhance public service delivery throughout Erie County. The COG consists of seven municipal governments and Erie County government. Areas of focus include:

- (1) eGovernment (electronic Government)
- (2) Public Safety
- (3) Public Water, Sewer and Storm Water Management
- (4) Public Works.

Using Six Thinking Hats, Mary facilitates committees consisting of local government officials, appointees, and private sector leaders. Participation is moving beyond COG governments as countywide interest grows. Two committees have been launched, have established priorities and action plans, and are moving forward. This effort, bringing the private and public sectors together, will help reduce costs, improve services, or both.

Apply Expert Group Facilitation Skills to Fuel Coalitions: Examples

REthink Erie Community College Planning

Helped 30+ volunteers to identify and explore potential revenue streams to support establishment of a community college in Erie County.

Young Erie Professionals

Facilitated strategic planning and position identification, job descriptions

Lead Economic Development Team

Facilitated recommendations for improvements to workforce development system to better connect regional employers with qualified employees

The Future: Unlimited

Using proven facilitation techniques, the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership has honed its capacity to build coalitions for economic and community development. Communities that possess this capacity will lead growth in our country in the coming years. Imagine what the impact will be when community after community begins to operate at this level. “We’re just beginning to tap the power of diverse leaders to work together with help from Six Thinking Hats for meeting facilitation,” VP of Growth Partnership Mary Bula says. “It’s made a huge difference in the way I, and we, do business here. I’m so glad we’ve got those tools.”