

Powerful Questions and Difficult Conversations

Results Count Community of Practice – Workshop Summary Santa Cruz County

Overview

In March, Santa Cruz County convened partners from County departments and community organizations for a full-day workshop on Powerful Questions and Difficult Conversations as part of the Results Count Community of Practice. The session focused on strengthening leadership skills that help people navigate complex work, build trust, and move toward equitable results for the community. The workshop was facilitated by leadership coach Claudia Horwitz and supported by County staff and Community of Practice facilitators. Participants spent the day learning frameworks, practicing skills in small groups, and applying the tools to real challenges they are navigating in their work and lives.



Figure 1. Participants working in small groups during the opening portion of the workshop.

Learning the Practice of Powerful Questions

Participants explored the role of questions in leadership and facilitation. The session highlighted the difference between short-lever questions that help understand a situation and long-lever

strategic questions that open up possibilities and encourage action. Through paired exercises, participants practiced asking open-ended questions, listening closely, and resisting the urge to immediately solve problems. Many participants reflected that simply asking better questions can help teams slow down, understand each other more clearly, and uncover new solutions.

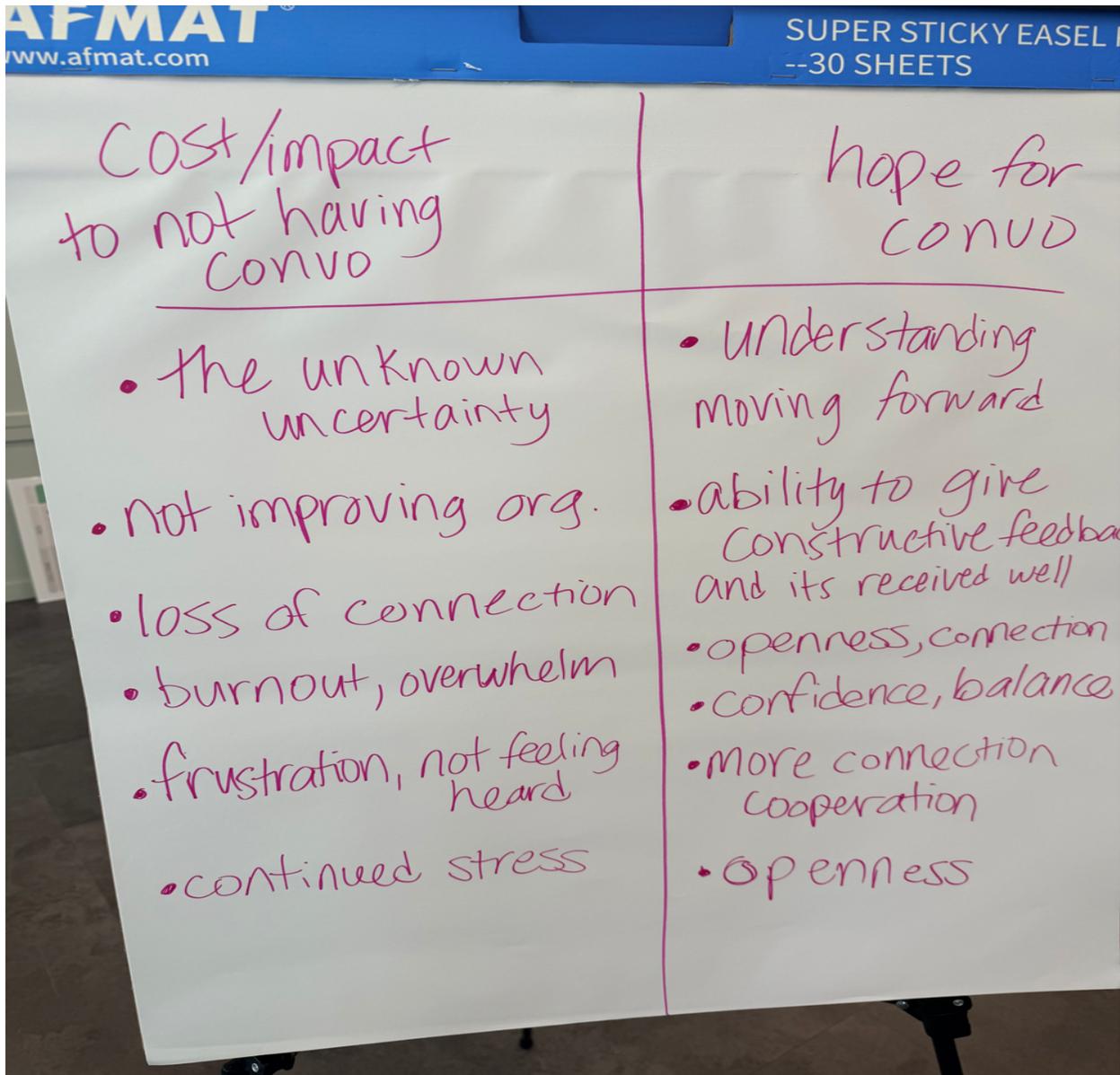


Figure 2. Group reflections about the impact of avoiding difficult conversations and hopes for addressing them.

Preparing for Difficult Conversations

The afternoon focused on preparing for difficult conversations. Participants learned a framework that explores three layers present in many challenging interactions: content, feelings, and identity. Participants mapped real conversations they need to have, identifying their perspective on the situation, their contribution to the dynamic, and possible perspectives of the other person. This preparation helped participants approach conversations with greater clarity, empathy, and curiosity.

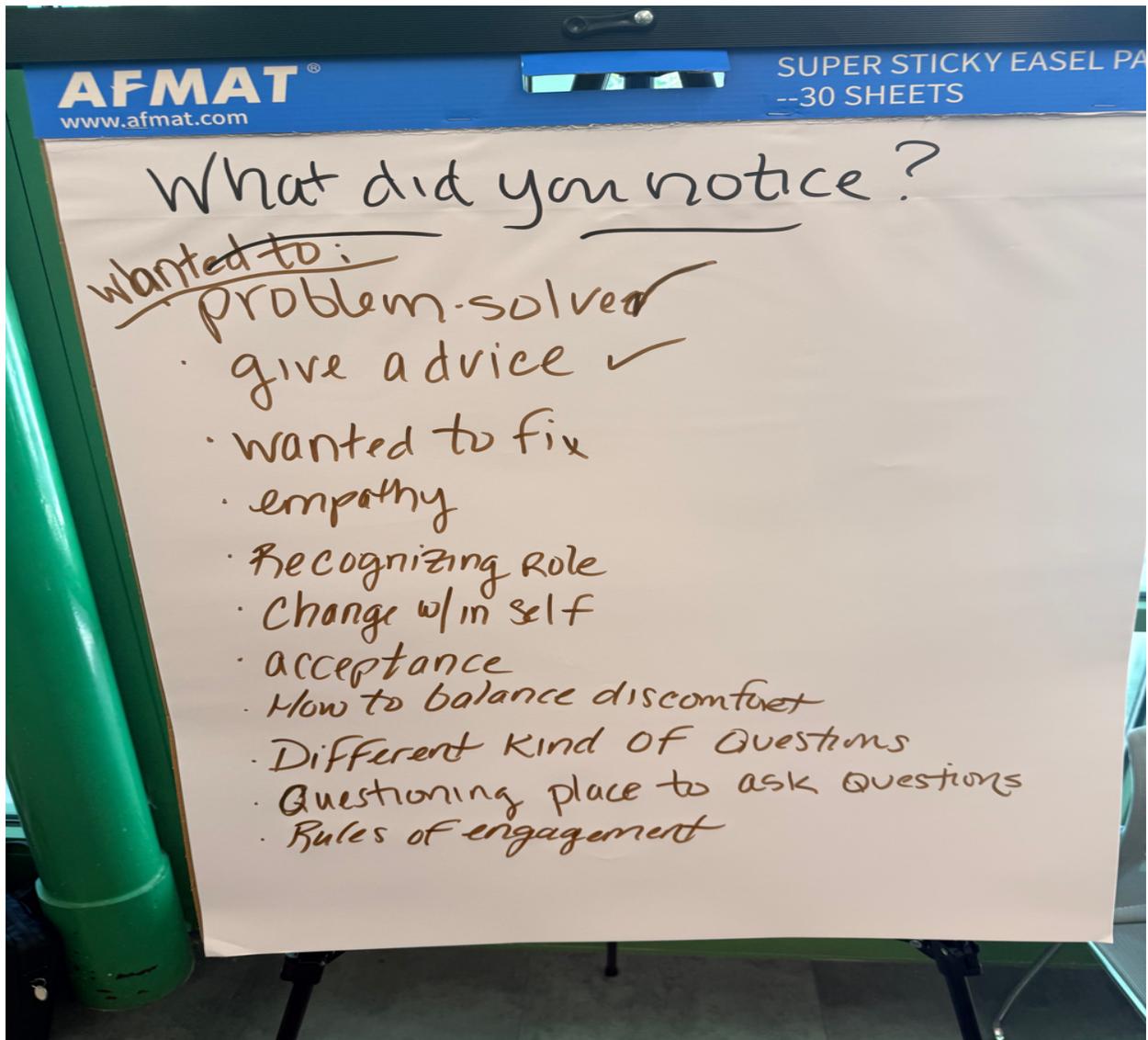


Figure 3. Participant notes identifying key insights from practicing powerful questions.



Figure 4. Facilitated role play demonstration during the difficult conversation practice session.

Key Insights from Participants

Throughout the day participants captured reflections about what shifted for them: • Asking questions before offering solutions • Preparing thoughtfully before entering a difficult conversation • Listening for shared values and perspectives • Recognizing that multiple stories can exist at once • Approaching conversations with curiosity rather than certainty Many participants noted that mapping conversations helped reduce anxiety and made challenging discussions feel more manageable.



Figure 5. Workshop participants collaborating in table groups during the afternoon practice rounds.

Building a Community of Practice

This workshop is part of Santa Cruz County's ongoing effort to strengthen a Community of Practice among County staff and community partners. By creating spaces for shared learning and practice, the County is building leadership capacity to navigate complex challenges and advance equitable results for people and communities across Santa Cruz County.

What shifted today

not overthinking
monster → right sizing
helpful w/ not running away
help for managers - ? is they can ask
~~help~~ implement being more assertive
not lead w/ frustration → can you help me?
tools as new manager
enthusiastic, orchestrate solving of conflict
diff perspective
step back; start w/ short lever?
trial + error esp dealing w/ pushback
have confidence to speak ~~at~~ up
perspective → more open, shared values
what / how (instead of why)
time to reflect before jumping in

Figure 6. Participant reflections capturing shifts in thinking and approach after the workshop.