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# Bringing Horses to Water? Overcoming Bad Relationships in the Pre-Negotiating Stage of Consensus Building

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*This article uses a case-study methodology to explore the impact of problematic relationships on the initiation of consensus-building efforts. The article notes that poor relations hinder the initiation process, while the expectation of benefits likely to result from the effort fosters the involvement of parties. The association between poor relations and expected benefits is explored with a focus on the appeal of collaboration. Strategies are then outlined to help facilitators to deal with problematic relationships by mitigating poor relations, highlighting incentives for participation, and building on the appeal of collaboration. Facilitators can use these strategies to increase their chances of success in initiating consensus-building efforts.*

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Despite the relevance of consensus building to the resolution of public policy disputes, it is an approach that is not used as often as it could be. One of the main tactical challenges facing managers who want to resolve issues through consensus is getting parties to the table (Poitras, Bowen, and Wiggins 2003; Poitras 2001). In fact, multiparty public dispute negotiations are generally highly difficult to initiate because they involve multiple issues, numerous parties and, often, a history of confrontation (Dukes 1996). Obvi-

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ously, working through this challenge is crucial to the increased use of consensus-building methods in resolving public conflict.

Getting parties to the negotiation table is a major challenge for the convener of the process, or whomever is performing the convening role whether this is the facilitator or a regulatory agency wanting to promote collaboration in resolving controversial issues. Our focus here is on what facilitators could do to convene reluctant parties to the negotiation table.

Few facilitators of public disputes would claim that initiation processes do not involve problematic relationships between parties (Justice and Jamieson 1999). Finding solutions to deal with poor relations during the initiation of a consensus-building effort is more problematic. The purpose of this article is to explore the impacts of problematic relationships on initiating consensus-building efforts and to propose impact-mitigation strategies. The first section discusses how to deal with poor relationships, according to conventional negotiating wisdom. Its second section analyzes the role played by problematic relationships in the initiation process. Building on that understanding, the final section introduces strategies that facilitators can use to mitigate problematic relationships and thus succeed in achieving consensus.

### **Problematic Relationships at the Outset**

Conventional negotiating wisdom points to two fundamental approaches that can be used to deal with poor relationships before parties even get to the bargaining table. A first proposition is that poor relations are a cause of difficult initiation, and thus the facilitator should focus on relationships before trying to get parties involved in a consensus-building effort. A second proposition is that poor relations pose a risk to the initiation process, and thus the facilitator should focus on benefits of negotiating (not the relationship) when they want to convene parties to the negotiating table.

*Focusing on relationships before trying to get parties involved.* The first approach involves trying to restore relationships between the parties before attempting to engage them in the initiation of a consensus-building process. The literature on deep-rooted and intergroup conflict recommends that antagonism between parties be addressed before exploring the possibility of negotiating a settlement (Burton 1996; Byrne and Keashly 2000; Fisher 1996; Rothman 1997). The assumption here is that agreeing to negotiate with the other parties in the context of a history of confrontation would create strong resistance in parties. It is as if deciding to negotiate with the "enemy" betrays the importance of past frustrations and sacrifices, appearing to the parties as a compromise of basic human needs such as dignity and respect.

Although some deep-rooted conflicts may reflect this assumption, not all conflict involves this degree of intractability. In fact, most facilitators involved in conflict with prior escalation will hear the familiar words: "Prove to me that I am likely to gain something and I will consider getting involved in a consensus-building process." This suggests that perceived benefits can

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eventually convince parties to get involved, despite a history of confrontation. It is as if the party were asking for extra benefits to compensate for putting aside the history of confrontation. The inference is that working on poor relations to improve an initiation process cannot be done in the abstract, separate from consideration of the benefits parties expect to reap from getting involved. Consequently, this approach may be neglecting an important fact: parties do get involved in consensus-building efforts to improve their current situation.

*Focusing on benefits to overcome poor relations.* The second strategy involves ignoring the relationship to focus exclusively on the benefits to be derived from participation. This is congruent with some well-accepted negotiation principles which hold that parties should separate the people issues from substantive issues (Fisher and Ury 1981; Fisher and Brown 1988; Fisher and Ertel 1995), or, in the context of this strategy, separate the people from the initiation process. The assumption here is that when parties focus on their self-interest and find sufficient benefits to be derived from participating in a consensus-building effort, they could get involved regardless of a history of confrontation and mistrust. Plenty of examples from everyday life seem to support this assumption; people often do put an adversarial relationship behind them when there is something significant to gain from working with others.

Although compelling and often true, this approach may require some caveats. What happens when relationships are extremely adverse? It does not take much experience in initiating consensus-building processes before facilitators hear such statements as: "I can't work with these guys, so there is no chance of getting any concrete benefits from cooperating." Mistrust diminishes the perceived probability of reaping any expected benefits. We can infer, therefore, that relationships do influence parties' ability to objectively evaluate their own interest in getting involved in a consensus-building effort. Thus in a situation involving extremely adverse relationships, focusing on the expected benefits alone may not create sufficient motivation to get the parties involved in a consensus-building effort. As a result, ignoring the impact of relationships may often prove to be counter-productive.

### **Factors Involved in Initiating a Consensus-Building Process**

In order to better evaluate the influence of relationships on the process of getting parties to the table, we conducted a case study to help identify the most significant factors involved in getting the parties to the table for problematic and straightforward initiation cases. We used a pattern-matching methodology to compare an inventory of initiation factors with the case-study participants' responses to a questionnaire regarding their experience.<sup>1</sup> This inventory of factors involved in an initiation process is based on a nine-factor framework developed by Poitras and Bowen (2002) and is summarized in Table One.

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**Table One**  
**Summary of Factors involved in Consensus-Building Initiation**

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FACTOR	DEFINITION
Scope of the problem	<i>The degree of complexity associated with the issues that are at the core of the consensus-building effort.</i>
Clarity of the objective	<i>The degree to which the goals of the consensus-building effort are pragmatic.</i>
Presence of pressure	<i>The degree of external forces in favor of pursuing the consensus-building effort.</i>
Joint decision making	<i>The degree to which decisions are made jointly.</i>
Stakeholder participation	<i>The degree of involvement of the parties in the consensus-building effort.</i>
Support structure	<i>The degree of assistance available for initiating a consensus-building process.</i>
Expected benefits	<i>The degree of potential benefits parties hope to gain by participating.</i>
Appeal of collaboration	<i>How motivated the parties are to work together.</i>
Poor relations	<i>How uncomfortable the parties are with the prospect of working together.</i>

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The participants' responses were compared with the framework in order to assess the importance each factor played in the initiation of the consensus-building effort. Thus the occurrence of each factor was measured for both case categories, and an inter-category comparison was done to determine the significant differences between problematic and straightforward cases.<sup>2</sup> The results of the data analysis are outlined in Table Two.

All nine factors played important contributory roles in the consensus-building process. However, Table Two shows two major distinctions between the responses of parties involved in a problematic initiation and those of parties involved in straightforward initiation. First, the difference in occurrences between categories for the quality of relationships is significant. Parties in the more problematic cases had poorer relations. Second, there is a strong difference between categories with regard to the expectation of benefits from getting involved.<sup>3</sup> Parties in straightforward cases expected more

benefits from their involvement. Moreover, the perception of expected benefits is the significantly most frequent factor reported in straightforward initiation cases.

**Table Two**  
**Occurrence of Factors in Problematic and Straightforward Cases**

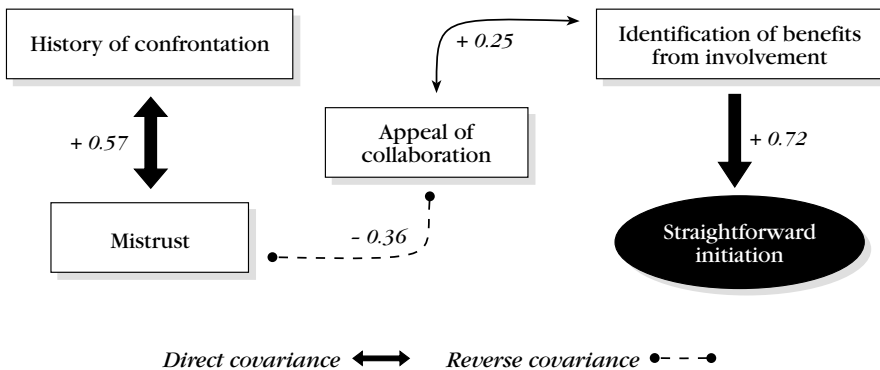
OCCURRENCE IN NARRATIVE	PROBLEMATIC INITIATION	STRAIGHTFORWARD INITIATION
71%-75%		<i>Expected benefits</i>
66%-0%		
61%-65%		
56%-60%	<i>Poor relations</i>	
51%-55%		
46%-50%	<i>Expected benefits</i>	Participation of stakeholders
41%-45%	<i>Participation of stakeholders</i> <i>Joint decision making</i>	<i>Joint decision making</i> <i>Presence of pressures</i>
36%-40% *	<i>Support structure</i>	
31%-35%	<i>Presence of pressures</i> <i>Support structure</i>	<i>Scope of the problem</i>
26%-30%		
21%-25%	<i>Scope of the problem</i>	<i>Clarity of objectives</i> <i>Appeal of collaboration</i>
16%-20%	<i>Clarity of objectives</i> <i>Appeal of collaboration</i>	
11%-15%		<i>Poor relations</i>
*Average occurrence	<i>Significant change</i> →	<i>Strong change</i> -----→

The overall result is that the decision by parties involved in problematic consensus-building initiatives was characterized by poor relations while the parties' decision involving straightforward initiation was characterized by clearly expected benefits. This result supports our contention that both poor relations and the assessment of potential benefits play a role in trying to motivate parties to participate in a consensus-building effort. Therefore, we suggest that facilitators should consider offering incentives while simultaneously working to restore relationships.

### ***Building Incentives while Restoring Relationship***

Effectively bridging a focus on poor relations as well as on benefits requires understanding of the connection between the two factors in the context of a consensus-building initiation process. We developed a hypothetical path analysis based on the association revealed in the linkages between the various variables identified in the narrative responses.<sup>4</sup> The model suggests interesting links between poor relations and potential benefits, and is representative of the experiences described in participants' narratives. It is important to note that poor relations have been divided into two variables: a history of confrontation between parties and mistrust. Figure One charts the interaction of variables influencing the parties' motivation for getting to the table.

**Figure One**  
**Hypothetical Qualitative Path Analysis of Variables Influencing the Parties' Motivation for Getting to the Table**



On one side of the model, the history of confrontation between the parties and their mutual mistrust are, not surprisingly, interrelated. The stronger the history of confrontation, the stronger the mistrust. Conversely, mistrust enhances the resilience of a history of confrontation. On the other side of the model, the identification of benefits from getting involved and the straightforwardness of an initiation process are correlated. The more benefits associated with getting to the table, the easier the process of getting parties to the negotiating table. It is not surprising that parties would be more motivated by a consensus-building process when they perceive many potential benefits resulting from the outcome.

What we did find surprising is, in the middle of the model, the role of the *perceived appeal* of collaboration as an intermediate variable between the level of mistrust and the identification of benefits from involvement. Mistrust between parties decreases the appeal of collaboration with the other

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parties which, in turn, lowers the perceived benefits from getting involved. Conversely, an increase in the perceived benefits would increase the appeal of collaboration, which could mitigate mistrust between parties.

This hypothetical model is consistent with two well-documented conflict phenomena: reactive devaluation (Neale and Bazerman 1992; Ross 1995) and superordinate goal (Sherif 1958). The first, reactive devaluation, is the phenomenon in which an offer from the other party to a conflict is devalued simply because it comes from this other party. Intuitively, people assume that a profit for the other is necessarily a loss for them. A negative relation between the parties accentuates this phenomenon. As a result, the initial gestures toward collaboration will be rebuffed, discouraging any attempts at opening a consensus-building process. This is congruent with the model outlined in this section: mistrust devaluates the appeal of collaborating with the other and will therefore reduce the perceived benefits from getting involved, thus making getting to the table less attractive.

The concept of superordinate goals, describes the phenomenon in which a goal that can only be achieved by cooperation between parties can reduce intergroup conflict. In other words, even parties with a history of confrontation can move beyond mistrust to collaboration when cooperation is required for the achievement of a highly valuable benefit to both parties. In their classic experiment, Sherif et al. (1961) showed that two groups at a summer camp could put their history of confrontation behind them in order to repair a water tank, the joint effort of both groups, so that they could remain at the summer camp. This is congruent with the model: the superordinate goal increases the appeal of collaboration, which is necessary to achieve the goal, and therefore mitigates the negative impact of mutual mistrust.

The appeal of collaboration is the intermediate variable that links the impact of poor relations on the expected benefits and consequently on the motivation to get involved. The implication for facilitators is that not only should they try to restore relationships and identify benefits from getting involved, but they should also work on the perceived appeal of collaboration by linking together all these variables. By using the appeal of collaboration as a bridge between poor relations and expected benefits, a strategy may be developed to overcome reluctance and convince the parties to sit down at the negotiation table.

### **A Two-Phase Pre-Negotiation Strategy**

Based on the model of variables influencing the motivation of parties to get to the negotiating table, we propose a two-stage strategy for initiating the consensus-building process. The first stage focuses on minimizing the influence exerted by the factor most likely to hinder the initiation phase (i.e., poor relations between the parties), and maximizing the influence of the factor most likely to convince parties to sit down at the table (i.e., the expected benefits). The second stage deals with bridging the relationships and bene-

fits. Table Three summarizes the interactions between strategies for dealing with problematic relationships.

***Mitigating Poor Relations***

Because poor relations between the parties are often at the root of problematic consensus-building initiation, the first proposed intervention focuses on the need to improve relations between affected parties. Poor relations are a significant predisposing and hindering factor because strained relationships usually taint the entire initiation process by creating the impression that it will be impossible to work with the other party. In addition to decreasing the motivation to participate, this perceived competition can be a major roadblock, keeping parties from fully appreciating the appeal of collaboration.

It is difficult to gauge exactly what is an appropriate positive relationship among parties in conflict. However, as long as parties feel that they can work together, relationships can be viewed as acceptable. When parties' relationships are strongly antagonistic, we suggest the use of conflict-analysis workshops to deescalate tension among parties, and gradually building a level of trust between the parties.

**Table Three**  
**Interactions Between Strategies for Addressing**  
**Problematic Relationships**

<b>Mitigate poor relations</b>	<b>Bridge relationships and incentives</b>	<b>Highlight incentives from participating</b>
<i>Use conflict analysis workshop to deescalate tensions</i>	↔	<i>Evaluate the need to collaborate</i>
	↔	<i>Assess the cost of not getting involved</i>
<i>Gradually build trust</i>	↔	<i>Explain the motivation for collaborating</i>
	↔	<i>Inventory benefits</i>

*Conflict-analysis workshops to deescalate tensions.* A history of conflict among parties can become a powerful obstacle to constructive dialogue and participation in a consensus-building effort (Fisher 1996; Senehi 2000 and 2002). These situations complicate the initiation of a consensus-building effort and sometimes render them impossible. When even civil conversation is a challenge, it may be advisable to attempt to deescalate the situation before engaging in the initiation process with the parties. The proposed tactic involves holding a conflict-analysis workshop before formally proposing consensus building. The goal of such a workshop is to allow parties to ana-



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lyze their situation jointly, focusing on the cycle of escalation and the increasing costs of maintaining the conflict.

One possible outcome would be the recognition that each party's behavior can lead to further conflict and that the cost of disagreeing is too high to be continued. Pre-negotiation meetings may also give parties a chance to vent their emotions, which is often a necessary first step in the initiation process. Otherwise, mistrust will hinder any attempt to highlight the value of mutual collaboration in seeking a consensual solution.

*Small steps to gradually build trust.* For a party to engage in a collaborative process, he or she must believe that the other parties involved will also collaborate in the process. A minimum level of trust is therefore required. When the parties do not trust or actively distrust one another, collaboration may seem impossible and consensus-building a waste of time. In such conditions, the consensus-building effort thus initiated will be characterized by suspicion and will probably fail (Deutsch 2000). When mistrust is a major component of the initiation process, it may be advisable to have the parties engage in it more gradually, slowly building the required trust before the consensus-building effort is initiated.

The general strategy here involves proposing some low-key collaborative activities before engaging in full-scale consensus building (Poitras and Renaud 1997). Such incremental steps can range from exchanging letters stating the parties' intentions to collaborating by sharing information. Organizing a joint fact-finding session for the parties could also be the basis of a greater consensus-building effort. One should not neglect the power of small, low-cost steps in restoring and building trust among parties. These activities are usually a way for parties to test the possibility of working together.

### ***Highlighting the Incentives***

The driving force behind straightforward consensus-building initiation is the expectation of benefits from participation. Consequently, the second intervention proposed is to ensure that all parties are offered potential incentives for participating in the consensus-building effort. It makes intuitive sense that parties will accept an invitation to join a consensus-building effort only if they are aware of its potential benefits. Conversely, parties are likely to refuse to participate where they do not foresee positive outcomes. When incentives are insufficient, two tactics can be used to integrate more incentives for participating: providing an inventory of individual benefits from involvement, and assessing the cost of not getting involved.

*Inventory of benefits from involvement.* The more potential benefits there are for each party, the more likely the parties are to get involved in a consensus-building effort. One strategy used to identify individual benefits is conflict assessment. During the assessment, a facilitator can interview parties one-by-one to develop a better understanding of their individual interests (Doyle and Straus 1982). For example, a company may consider it advantageous to obtain a permit through a consensus-building process. This would

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clearly be an individual benefit and is potentially a major source of motivation for the company. When conducting the assessment, it may be important to assess how many future interactions are foreseeable, and the point to which developing a working relationship is important in achieving future benefits (Zubeck 1992). One strategy to explore with parties is how likely they are to interact with each other in the future (i.e., negotiation as a repeating game). For example, governmental agencies are usually interested in developing a working relationship with interest groups and business representatives because they usually have to deal with these parties on a regular basis. An awareness of this likelihood would help parties to better understand what they are seeking when participating in a consensus-building effort.

*Assessment of the cost of not getting involved.* Even when there is no direct or indirect benefit to getting involved, there may be some risk associated with being left out of the process. For example, a company or a citizens' group may join an effort to ensure that the negotiation of a new regulation does not create an unacceptable precedent. When the benefits of participating are unclear, the costs of not getting involved should be explored in order to present engagement positively as a potential way of avoiding costs or gaining opportunities. One strategy used to assess the cost of not getting involved is to explore the alternatives to a negotiated settlement. Sometimes parties have not evaluated or have overestimated what they can achieve without collaboration.

In this regard, adding a touch of reality to the decision to participate can be useful. This can also help parties clarify the minimum requirements of any agreement. The cost of delaying the search for a resolution should be explored with parties (Cormick 1989). For example, one could compare with parties what the real costs are of maintaining a conflict, e.g., stress and legal expenses. Any combination of these three factors increases the incentive for parties to collaborate

### ***Bridging Relationships and Benefits***

According to our model, the bridge that links poor relations and the benefits expected from participation is the appeal of collaboration. Consequently, the last intervention proposed for creating a successful initiation process is to work on the appeal of collaboration. When stakeholders realize that the concrete gain, or cost avoided, through cooperation is potentially greater than what can be achieved without collaboration, consensus building seems like a desirable course of action (Lejano and Davos 1999). It is difficult to set firm criteria, but every party should eventually view collaboration as potentially fruitful, despite poor relations with other parties. Two strategies that can be useful are: assessing the need to collaborate and explaining the motivation for collaboration.

*Evaluate the need to collaborate.* It is important to distinguish between the need to resolve issues and the need to collaborate. Some issues may be important but can be resolved without collaboration. Other issues may only be resolved through collaboration. As discussed earlier, the expect-

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tation of benefits can diminish the hindrance posed by poor relations only when achieving these benefits requires collaboration.

By assessing the degree to which collaboration is required, one can evaluate the potential for bridging benefits and relationships in an attempt to reduce the impact of mistrust. When exploring the need to resolve issues with the parties, it is important to keep two other reasons for consensus building in mind. First, authorities might mandate consensus building. In this case, authorities' distribution of benefits to parties is contingent upon the parties reaching a consensus. For example, a governmental agency could make a project's funding contingent upon all stakeholders agreeing on a budget. Second, collaboration might be necessary because parties have the potential to frustrate each other, thus effectively creating a stalemate (Cormick 1989). In other words, in the case of competition for resources, the potential for a stalemate could help parties realize that some benefits must be shared because they cannot be secured independently.

*Explain the motivation for collaborating.* The second proposed approach is to bridge relationships and benefits by explaining the motivation for collaborating. A strategy to diminish the devaluative reaction to an offer to collaborate is to explain the forces, constraints, or motives behind the decision to collaborate (Ross 1995). Thus the offer to collaborate might not be viewed as merely an attempt to gain an advantage over the other party; it could be seen as a rational decision to decrease the costs associated with a conflict. The objective here is to present the idea of getting involved in a consensus-building process not as an altruistic move, but rather as a self-interested and rational decision. Mutual mistrust will make parties suspicious of each other's motivation for collaboration; it is hard to believe that someone we distrust can be benevolent. As a result, the appeal of collaboration will be deemed more sincere when grounded in the interest of avoiding the cost of confrontation.

## Conclusion

This article suggests a variety of strategies that facilitators may use in the first stage of a consensus-building process. However, as outlined in the framework for understanding consensus-building initiation, several factors are likely to play a role in the initiation phase. Once the variable of poor relations, expected benefits and the appeal of collaboration are worked on, the facilitator should focus on other important factors in the initiation context. For example, the decision-making structure of the consensus-building effort will be important to the parties, and facilitators must address this issue. In this regard, the second stage of the initiation phase could be considered a means for fine-tuning the context by working on the remaining factors.

In addition, some of the factors will impact on the relationships, expected benefits, and appeal of collaboration. The personality and the reputation of the facilitator (a subcategory of the support structure) will obviously have an impact on parties' motivation for getting involved in a con-

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sensus-building effort. A highly-trusted facilitator can bridge the mistrust between the parties. The parties may not trust one another but since they trust the facilitator, they will not devalue the appeal of collaboration. They will trust the facilitator to bring them toward a fair, common ground and therefore will be less likely to devalue the expected benefits of getting involved in the consensus-building effort.

Similarly, the support of authorities (a subcategory of joint decision making) for the consensus-building effort will have an impact on parties' willingness to come to the negotiating table. In this case, the support of authority would increase parties' perception that benefits are achievable, almost as if they were guaranteed by authorities in case of an agreement. This would strengthen the link between benefits and the value of collaborating to reach these benefits. These examples do not rebut the model outlined in this paper, but rather integrate it, as the personality of the facilitator and the support of authority effectively moderate the association between mistrust, the appeal of collaboration and the expected benefits. The nexus stays the same: parties must feel that, despite mistrust, collaborating with the other is likely to bring benefits.

## NOTES

1. Four cases involving public policy decision making in Eastern Massachusetts were studied; each dealt generally with the issue of coastal management (for a more complete description of the case study, see Poitras 2001). The substantive issues under consideration by these efforts addressed a broad range of questions common to consensus-building challenges. To reveal differences in initiation processes among efforts with various outcomes, the sampling collection included two efforts with a problematic initiation and two efforts with a straightforward initiation. The selection of participants for the case study targeted parties who were involved in these four consensus-building efforts. A total of 28 parties participated: 12 parties were involved in the problematic initiation and 16 parties were involved in the straightforward initiation. It took about eight months to collect the data, and every party contacted responded to all consensus-building efforts. Participants received a questionnaire that asked them to describe factors that helped or hindered the initiation process, based on their own experience. The question was aimed at the factors that played a role in the respondents' willingness to approach the table. Participants were given an open-ended question and invited to respond using a narrative text.

2. The difference in factors' occurrences between problematic and successful cases was converted into a z-score for the inter-category comparison. Thus, the higher the difference of a factor's occurrence as compared to the average difference of occurrence is, the more salient that difference in factor occurrence is.

3. Though not significant, the difference in occurrence of the relationship quality factor between successful and problematic cases is sufficiently strong to be considered in the analysis of factors' role in the initiation process.

4. The similarity matrix was constructed with SPSS 11.5 for Windows using a Dice measure for binary data as a method to analyze the proximity among variables. Only covariances over .25 were considered for the construction of the hypothetical path analysis. Those covariances were regarded as indicators of a potential link between variables (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

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