



Christine Williams with her book titled "Working as One." (Phil Masturzo/Akron Beacon Journal)

## Book offers advice to work together

### Bath Township author says communication is key

By Paula Schleis

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When Christine C. Williams coaches groups about the value of everyone rowing together toward a common goal, she speaks from personal experience.

She still laughs when she recalls an outing with her husband to West Branch State Park during which the engine of their little red boat died 100 yards from shore.

"We knew our destination. We saw the ramp," she said. But unskilled in the use of oars, the couple ended up going around in circles until her husband jumped into the water in frustration and pulled the boat in.

The value of open and inviting communication in everyday business operations is the main premise of her new book, *Working as One: Fundamental Conversations That Build Cooperation & Get Results*.

Williams, who lives in Bath Township, founded Focus Consulting Group in 1992, using her Ph.D. in education and her master's in guidance and counseling to teach groups how to make collaboration a way of life.

"I've seen a lot of unnecessary frustration and anguish in the workplace and in most cases it wasn't out of malice or anyone wanting to do harm to one another," she said. "What I found was people just didn't take the time to talk to one another about issues that could make a difference in their work lives."

Williams condensed what she has learned into seven basic conversations that she says are the foundation for getting people to reach an agreement, be more productive and get results.

"It's really not anything that's necessarily new, but when you put the framework out there, people say, 'This I can do,'" she said.

The key conversations might seem obvious. They range from shared understanding (vision, mission, core values) to practical applications (planning and assigning roles and responsibilities).

But Williams said she's often surprised how those conversations can reveal big differences in how and what people think.

For instance, Williams has been a party to many meetings where employers revealed they were focused on making or saving money while staffers saw their priority as finding resources to help clients or customers.

Williams proposes "trigger questions" that illuminate those differences so everyone can begin the process of moving to common ground.

Revealing discussions center around queries such as "Why do I personally value being a member of this group?" to "Where do I think this organization is headed?"

It's a carefully choreographed dance where the right steps can guide subordinates and supervisors in realigning their values toward a shared goal, Williams said.

Another area where many leaderships fail is thinking these kinds of conversations only need to happen when there is some companywide restructuring or annual planning session.

Reinforcing of mutual goals and strategies should take place on a daily basis, Williams said, whether it takes the form of conversations between two or three people or a departmentwide meeting of 50.

"You have to keep at it to keep it going," Williams said.

And therein lies the challenge, admitted Sister Joanne Buckman, director of the Crown Point Farm and Education Center in Bath Township.

Operated by the Sisters of St. Dominic of Akron, the 10-acre organic farm is trying to employ the strategies of Williams, who is currently serving as the center's board president.

"I very much believe in having broader conversations," Buckman said. That means making sure all employees, working board members and even volunteers have the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process.

Still, it's one thing to seek input on a quarterly basis, when Crown Point updates its strategic plan.

It's something else to try and weave those collaborative conversations into daily affairs, Buckman said.

"We're not there yet," she said, "but I definitely see the value in (embracing) a team approach where all of us . . . have a very significant piece to play in implementing the vision and the mission of a particular place."

## **ABOUT THE BOOK**

**Title:** *Working as One: Fundamental Conversations That build Cooperation & Get Results* (Brown Books, 2007)

**Author:** Bath Township resident Christine C. Williams

**List price:** \$14.95

### **Three premises**

In Jobs, homes, communities and organizations, we experience situations where working together as a cohesive unit creates better results.

In order to work together, we need to talk with one another in constructive ways.

Fundamental conversations lead to a more focused, collaborative, productive, and meaningful environment.

### **Required conversations**

These are the seven fundamental discussions that every group should have, requiring a shift in thinking from "me" to "we."

**(1) Vision:** What are we trying to collectively create?

**(2) Mission:** What is our collective purpose?

**(3) Values:** What are our collective core values?

**(4) Customers:** Who are our customers and what are their needs?

**(5) Planning:** Where are we now, where are we headed and how will we get there?

**(6) Roles:** What are our individual responsibilities in working toward the vision?

**(7) Deal busters:** What structures and processes do we use to communicate with each other, resolve conflicts and make decisions?

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