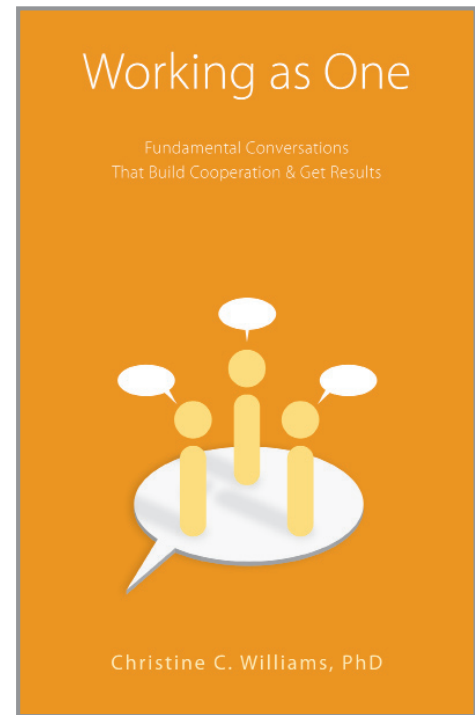


Christine C. Williams, PhD



Where did you get your inspiration for *Working as One*?

The inspiration for *Working as One* came from the hundreds of workgroups I facilitated over the last twenty-five years. I witnessed frustration, anger, confusion, and divisiveness among many coworkers, but also saw the enthusiasm, productivity, and cohesiveness among others. I found that one of the major differences was that people who worked well together talked regularly with one another about matters of mutual importance.

Simultaneously, the whole idea of systems thinking—a concept where each person contributes to an overall effort—fascinated me, not simply as a theory, but in practical terms. I read several works that helped shape thinking behaviors and culture in today’s workplace, including the writings of W. Edward Deming, David Bohm, and Margaret Wheatley. Everything kept pointing in the same direction—the nature of our work requires us to function as part of an interdependent system rather than as separate individuals. We’re connected and we have to think, talk, and act in ways that support that connection.

Most importantly, I wanted to create a practical book that people could read within a short period of time but also refer to regularly. From experience, I know that when coworkers follow the framework and use the suggested tools outlined in *Working as One*, it sets the stage for positive and productive work.

Did your work with the Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration help in the creation of this book? How did your experiences contribute to the ideas compiled in *Working as One*?

My work with the Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration greatly influenced the creation of this book. Both as an employee and as a consultant, I had extensive opportunities to work with a variety of talented people and in workgroups throughout the United States.

I learned that talking and reaching agreements with one another really does build cooperation and gets measurable results. I also learned that it requires a long-term mindset; things don't just happen overnight, and there are certainly bumps along the way.

In my years working with the V.A., I've witnessed firsthand what can happen when thousands of coworkers focus on a shared vision, mission, values, and priorities. Today, the V.A. is considered a leader in health care innovations, and performance measures indicate that veterans receive the finest treatment available in the world. I'm proud to have been associated with such dedicated people.

What have you learned from other jobs you have had, and how have they helped contribute to the principles taught in this book?

I think one of the consistent things I have learned from all of my clients is the importance of being truly present in a conversation. By that I mean giving your full attention to what the speaker is saying and trying to genuinely communicate, rather than focusing on your own fears, biases, worries, or other distractions. You have to listen to capture what the other person is trying to say, ask questions to further your understanding, and check in to make sure you heard accurately.

When we are consciously present during a conversation, it creates a kind of space for creative thinking and problem solving. There's almost a magic that occurs when people who work together are able to do this. What's so exciting is that, with the right intentions and the proper use of the communication tools and techniques, we all have the potential to make this happen every day.

***Working as One* stresses the importance of communication in achieving workplace results. Can you briefly describe what a "conversation cycle" is?**

The conversation cycle is an overall framework for talking with one another that helps us recognize that most conversations are more than "one shot deals." This cycle incorporates a three-phase process

that includes “before the conversation,” “during the conversation,” and “following the conversation.” The cycle can be used between two people or two hundred.

Feedback from managers and coworkers who have used this conversation cycle claims it makes them more thoughtful regarding how and when to approach and engage others. They feel more confident during the conversation because, using their toolkits, they effectively listen and ask questions. Finally, including the follow-through actions in the cycle elevates the importance of what will happen after everyone walks out the door.

What do you believe the most important lesson in *Working as One* is?

For me, the most important lesson in *Working as One* is that, to get skilled people interested in working together and focused in a common direction, you have to first begin by looking at your own ways of thinking, talking, and acting.

In the book, I share four guidelines for conversation success. These include (1) starting with your own area of influence; (2) being aware of your intentions and their effect on conversations; (3) moving to a state of attention; and (4) keeping at it to keep going.

With each of these guidelines, the starting point is looking within. When you look at how you impact others, you move from a victim mentality to one of empowerment. When you now speak, it is from a position of personal awareness and responsibility. Your skills are built upon a solid foundation of integrity and thus, your words are far more likely to be heard and valued by coworkers. More importantly, you increase your own self-respect and confidence.

Who is your ideal reader? Who will benefit most from this book?

Working as One is intended for anyone who has to work with others to get things done. In the context of this book, the terms “workplace” and “coworkers” refer to those in more traditional workplace settings in business, education, government, service industries, manufacturing, etc., as well as in the nonprofit, community, and volunteer sectors.

The common denominator is that the people are connected to provide a product, service, or outcome, and that in order to properly conduct their work they have to talk and reach agreements with one another about fundamental issues. *Working as One* provides over sixty specific examples to inform readers of the many ways this information can improve their everyday communications with others.

Describe a situation in your working career that became a positive experience due to proper cooperation and communication.

When I worked as a program coordinator at a health care education center, the staff regularly surveyed our customers (medical workers and management) about their educational needs. The concept sounded terrific. What could be better than asking those you serve about what educational support they needed and wanted?

The only problem was we didn't listen. Instead, we continued to provide what we thought our customers needed (which was some darn good stuff, but wasn't what they had asked for). As a result, we educators were perceived as having an "egghead" mentality, incapable of responding to our customers' requests.

Eventually, we restructured the process to make it more customer-focused. Through a series of ongoing discussions, representatives from both the education center and the individual hospitals created a shared educational vision, mission, goals, and working agreements that were aligned with the true educational needs of hospital employees. Through these efforts, a sense of cooperation and support was created. We increased educational offerings to a wider range of health care providers at a more reasonable cost than previously.

By reading your book, what can your readers ultimately hope to accomplish?

Overall, I'm hoping readers will accomplish a sense of confidence to effectively talk with one another in their workplaces—whether it's in a traditional or volunteer setting. If each of us would use regularly the conversations, guidelines, and communication tools found in *Working as One*, I think our work would be more focused, collaborative, efficient and productive. In some situations, you may be the only one who is interested in improving workplace conversations; however, the more you demonstrate these practices, the more likely you will influence others. It actually can cause a snowball effect because, mostly, coworkers want to get along and feel productive.