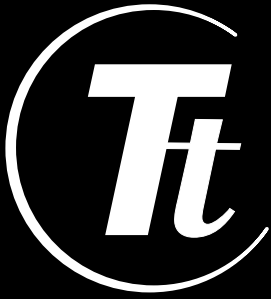


CARNEGIE MELLON

Community



ThinkTank

Intercultural Problem-Solving  
for Performance  
in WorkPlaces and WorkLives

BRIEF 1 | FALL 2000

The Carnegie Mellon COMMUNITY THINK TANK creates an intercultural body of problem solvers – from Pittsburgh's urban community, business, regional development, social service, and education – to find workable solutions to Workplace, Worklife problems. BRIEF 1 explores points of consensus emerging from the THINK TANK process.

## URBAN EMPLOYEES IN THE NEW WORKPLACE

### Intercultural Decision Making Affects Retention and Performance

**F**or Pittsburgh employers, the new urban workforce challenges old approaches to recruitment, retention, and performance. Meanwhile, inexperienced employees are struggling to negotiate this culture of work amid the constraints of poverty. Workforce development appears inextricably tied to a capacity for interculturally informed decision making – by both groups.

The Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank brings the tools of intercultural problem solving to issues of work, youth, and community development.

Its structured dialogue uses both cultural diversity and the alternative perspectives of employers, employees, and the community to identify real workplace problems and to explore and test solutions.

#### THE THINK TANK IDENTIFIES TWO AREAS FOR ACTION

The Think Tank's findings over the last twelve months are pointing to two critical factors that affect workplace performance and retention:

**1 Intercultural Problem-Solving** Do management/staff teams have the capacity for intercultural problem-solving? Are they tapping the expertise of bottom-tier workers in decisions that affect the performance of the workplace?

**2 Capacity-Building Tools for Local Decision Making** Do new employees have a developed capacity for work-based decision making? Are business and community support services anchoring their training to a parallel development of this core capacity that links work, decisions, and personal growth?



*I think this employee's reading of the situation would come as a big surprise to some managers.*

# INTERCULTURAL PROBLEM-SOLVING

## Using Diversity Strategically to Construct and Test Solutions

### THE THINK TANK



TANF recipients point out options to the Executive Director of Allegheny County Assistance and the Director of CMU Outreach at "Making Welfare Reform Work."

*The CARNEGIE MELLON COMMUNITY THINK TANK channels dialogue into a structured solution-oriented process.*

- 1 The Think Tank opens up a unique intercultural forum in which administrators, human resource developers, line managers, researchers, educators, community workers, trainers, and employees meet as collaborators.
- 2 It structures talk into a problem-solving search for diverse perspectives, rival hypotheses, and collaborative solutions.
- 3 It draws out normally untapped levels of community expertise to build more grounded, intercultural understandings of problems and to construct community-savvy options for action.

### IN PROGRESS: THINK TANKS IN SERVICE AND HEALTHCARE CLUSTERS

( See findings at [www.cmu.edu/outreach/thinktank](http://www.cmu.edu/outreach/thinktank) )

*The THINK TANK inquiries reflect our concern for economic development, social justice, and the public consequences of performance. Three THINK TANKS currently underway are structured around the following problem scenarios:*

#### Negotiating The Culture of Work and Technology

*Raises the job-entry problems of a single mother at the admissions desk confronting mainstream expectations and technology.*

FINDINGS PUBLISHED 1.1.01

#### Competing Images of Teamwork and Respect in the Service Industry

*Explores how managers, waitresses, and customers read a situation differently.*

#### Healthcare: The Dilemma of Teamwork, Time and Turnover

*Poses the problems of nursing aides who fill low wage, low status, high turnover jobs, but are responsible for 85% of senior care.*

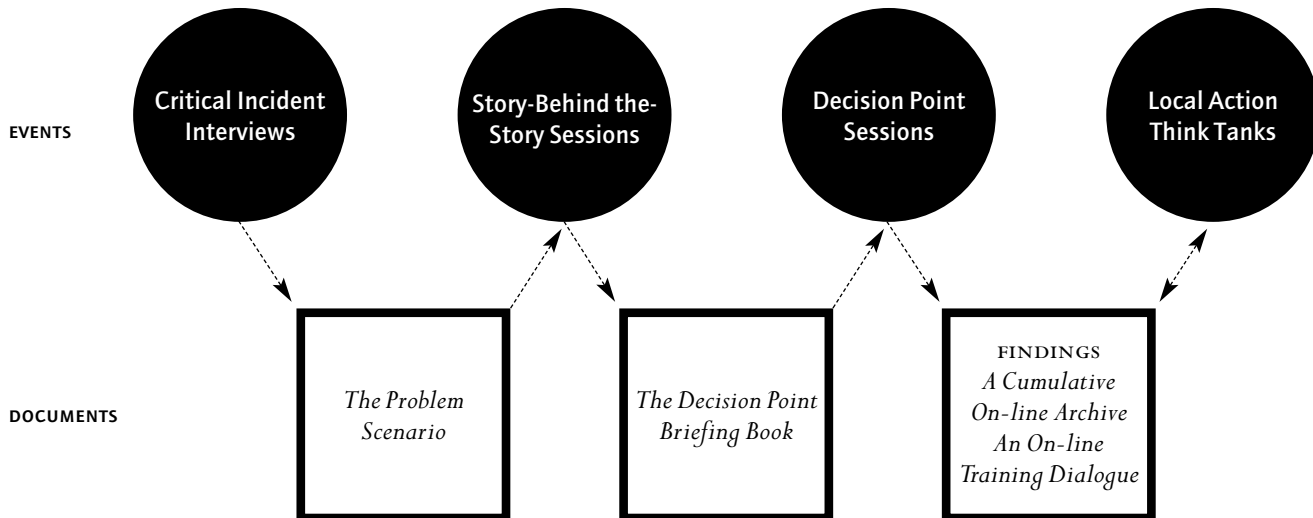
### THE PROBLEM

Efforts to create a climate for performance at work must respond to deep-running conflicts in the current context for work. As public education struggles to meet national standards and a digital divide separates poor families from technology, urban neighborhoods have seen their culture of work sapped by a generation of unemployment.<sup>1</sup> A growing segment of Pittsburgh is in the fluid bottom of the economy where replaceable workers "churn" through a series of low wage, low benefit, and limited growth jobs.<sup>2</sup> Even as employment increases, sharply visible racial disparities in wages and jobs remain.<sup>3</sup>

TANF recipients find jobs but not self-sufficiency at the expense of health and child care.<sup>4</sup> In booming health care, 40% of new jobs are at the lowest tier.<sup>5</sup> Urban neighborhoods with an educated, experienced, and stable workforce remain enclaves of working poor.<sup>6</sup> And as local workforce development attempts to shift from triage to asset development the national earnings gap of the urban poor widens.<sup>7</sup> These are systemic factors which undermine preparation and undercut motivation for performance in bottom tier jobs. If workforce development cannot change them, it must confront them.

<sup>1</sup> W.J. Wilson, When Work Disappears. <sup>2</sup> R. Zemsky, What Employers Want. <sup>3</sup> R. Bangs, Pittsburgh Benchmarks. <sup>4</sup> Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board. <sup>5</sup> HPI, Employment Trends. <sup>6</sup> PPND, Garfield Employment Study. <sup>7</sup> W.J. Wilson, The Bridge Over The Racial Divide

**THE PROCESS**



**Critical Incident Interviews** with managers, employees and supporters identify performance problems and lead to broadly-based, locally grounded scenarios that structure the Think Tank’s deliberations.

**Story-Behind-the-Story Sessions** uncover the diverse interpretations employees, managers, and community members bring to these problem situations. The sessions reveal the hidden logics behind how people respond. These “rival readings” are consolidated into a decision point briefing book.

**Decision Point Sessions** shift the focus to potential actions within workforce policy, management, education, human resources, and

community support. Responding to the briefing book and each other, Think Tank participants begin to construct and test more diversely informed options.

**Local Action THINK TANKS** take this process and its findings to individual workplaces, career centers, and community organizations. With the support of a trained local leader and the Think Tank’s on-line tools, these dialogues turn talk into strategic, local action.

**THINK TANK Findings** are archived in an on-line knowledge bank, and are also the basis for a multi-media management/staff training tool.

**THE PARTICIPANTS**

*The growing THINK TANK roster includes participants from:*

- Mellon Bank
- Kaufmann’s
- Mercy Hospital
- Hospital Council
- Highmark
- Carnegie Mellon
- University of Pittsburgh
- Urban League
- Pittsburgh Leadership Foundation

- EECM
- Community House
- Addison Works
- Family Guidance
- Community Builders
- Zoar New Day
- Boys & Girls Club
- Youth Works
- Job Corps
- COGIC, Baptist, and Presbyterian Churches

- Pittsburgh Partnership
- Neighborhood Development
- HUD
- Postal Employees 510
- Workforce Connections
- Bidwell Training
- Juvenile Justice
- Pittsburgh Foundation
- McCune Foundation
- Allegheny District Attorney
- Mentoring Partnership

*With the support of:*

- Pittsburgh Foundation
- R.K. Mellon Foundation
- Community House

# BUILDING LOCAL CAPACITY AND TOOLS FOR ACTION

## LOCAL ACTION THINK TANKS

*Real change will be rooted in shared local decisions and specific issues. Local Action THINK TANKS turn intercultural problem solving into a community asset.*

**Addison Works** Managers, social workers, and clients address the problems that occur after placement.

**Carnegie Science Center** Everyone joins an All Staff Day dialogue on youth employees.

**Drawing on the Local: CMU and Community Expertise** Justin Johnson, Esther Bush and 180 others examine university outreach. ([www.cmu.edu/outreach](http://www.cmu.edu/outreach))

**Langley High School Applied Learning Plan** Teachers and Community Partners compare expectations for learning.

**Heinz School of Public Policy: Making Welfare Reform Work** 200 people actively participate in a dialogue. ([www.cmu.edu/home/news/welfare.html](http://www.cmu.edu/home/news/welfare.html))

**Lemington Center** Nurses and Aides examine the story-behind-the-story on teamwork.

## COMMUNITY FELLOWS AND CORPORATE PARTNERS

The capacity for intercultural problem solving must be a community asset. The Carnegie Mellon Community Fellows program builds the capacity of grassroots leaders committed to initiating Local Action Think Tanks in their community. The program lets businesses prepare their own staff to guide intercultural problem solving in the workplace.

Corporate Partners support this community capacity-building effort for the region and for the benefit of their own workplaces.

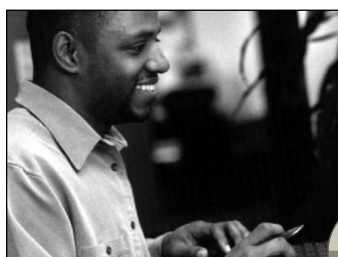
## ON-LINE KNOWLEDGE BANK + MULTIMEDIA TRAINING TOOL

Too often, community expertise and insights fade away as talk ends. The on-line Knowledge Bank lets users search the Think Tank's findings around key decision points. But archives alone cannot replace the experience of an intercultural collaboration. The on-line Training Dialogue immerses managers, staff, and trainees in a diverse story-behind-the-story experience as a prologue to live discussions of options.

## THE DECISION MAKER'S ASSET ASSESSMENT

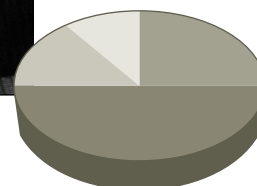
The ultimate bottom line in workforce development is an individual in the full possession of his or her powers, who brings that human potential to work. One metric for success is the self-managed growth of those assets.

The Decision Maker's Asset Assessment is an on-line tool that supports and monitors growth in a person's network of support, community assets, and decision making skills. Analysis by Carnegie Mellon lets programs assess their impact and lets adults and youth document their capacity.



Assessing Growth in Reflective Decision-Making

Building a Journey Book



CARNEGIE MELLON  
**CommunityThinkTank**

### CARNEGIE MELLON CENTER FOR UNIVERSITY OUTREACH

DR. LINDA FLOWER *Director* WAYNE B. COBB *Director of Community Education*  
SUSAN SWAN *Research Assistant*

P 412.268.7801 F 412.268.7989 W [www.cmu.edu/outreach](http://www.cmu.edu/outreach)