

Steve Charbonneau: I emphasize always that, you know, a, a huge part of our responsibility is to know how to listen in a way that I understand what it is you're saying. I don't have to agree. I don't have to accept it, but I have to understand it.

Sam Fuqua: That's Steve Charbonneau, and this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. On this episode, Steve Charbonneau talks about facilitating large groups involved in conflict. He's a longtime mediator based in Colorado. Charbonneau was brought in to facilitate a series of meetings focused on changing the name of a Denver neighborhood that was called Stapleton. It was named after a former Denver mayor who was also a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Previous attempts to change the name had failed, but after several more African Americans were killed by police this spring, the name change effort moved forward again.

I'm Sam Fuqua, joined as always by Jes Rau. Hi Jes.

Jes Rau: Hey there.

Sam Fuqua: And we're very pleased to have Steve Charbonneau with us. Steve, thanks for being a part of this program.

Steve Charbonneau: Well, thanks for, for inviting me.

Sam Fuqua: For folks who aren't familiar, could you please give us a quick background overview of the conflict with the neighborhood formally known as Stapleton?

Steve Charbonneau: I don't know exactly when the conflict began. I know that I was briefly involved. Probably two, two and a half years ago, I went to a couple of neighborhood meetings where they were contemplating the change of the name. Uh, they had thought at that point that if this would go forward, it might be helpful to have a third party kind of help facilitate that process. But a couple of years ago, it just didn't move forward. So, uh, it, it started back there. There was a growing concern, uh, around the name Stapleton, what that represented to a lot of different people. And as momentum grew, and particularly as momentum grew this summer, it just seemed like it was the right time to revisit and rename, uh, the former Stapleton neighborhood.

Sam Fuqua: So when you get called in to a situation like this as a facilitator, as a mediator, a large group situation, uh, with a deadline, what are your goals?

Steve Charbonneau: I come in, uh, and I tell people right up front, I come in as the guy that's gotta sit in the middle. Every single one of these, you know, large group processes has a lot of different opinions that surface and swirl around it. And my role is to get up to speed on what the different issues and concerns are, what the nuances are, and then help the parties really find a way to talk as openly and as honestly, and as respectfully as they can, uh, air whatever those different opinions are. And my intention, my hope, is that through that process, we're able to reach a consensus. Uh, not everybody's gonna walk away going, "Woohoo, I got everything I wanted!" But I, my, my, my goal is for people to walk away feeling like it was a fair process, and they can be content with the outcome.

Jes Rau: So you mentioned that there were some things that the name symbolized. What were the, uh, ways that each community or each member of the community were, um, relating to the name or what, what was it symbolizing for folks?

Steve Charbonneau: Uh, I think for a lot of people, initially, they just weren't aware of the history of, uh, a former mayor, Mr. Stapleton. I just don't believe they thought about it. And as we spent some time, uh, particularly this summer evaluating, uh, some of the people that we've held up and esteemed and looked at their history and maybe some of the things they stood for, uh, we got uncomfortable with some of those pieces. And I know that there were neighbors who got increasingly uncomfortable with, you know, a neighborhood that represented a former mayor who was a, an active member of the Ku Klux Klan and who really represented values that they didn't feel they wanted their neighborhood to be representative of.

Jes Rau: That kind of dynamic can cause, can be really tricky in conflict, right? Things that are connected to tough topics that we have a hard time talking about, like race or um, power dynamics, those types of things. Does that change anything in the process that you use?

Steve Charbonneau: I don't know that it changes anything fundamentally in the process. It just makes it more difficult and it, it means I have to pay a lot more attention to, to the nuances because people don't always know how to talk about things like race and racism and culture and, um, historical figures. And they're sometimes uncomfortable talking about it, or they just come blasting out of the gates with a, a strong opinion that sometimes alienates people. So there's, you get either side of those extremes, and most of the situations I get dropped into, uh, they're conflictual. And people have really strong feelings and strong emotions on, on the whole spectrum, on either side of the, the discussion.

Sam Fuqua: So what then is the most important part, or what are the most important parts of the process for you, knowing that, that people are gonna come with those different perspectives, uh, or with ignorance, or with anger?

Steve Charbonneau: Let me talk about that just slightly within the context of the whole, uh, advisory board for the renaming of Stapleton. Uh, I had not met anyone on the board before. It was a board of, I believe, 17 people if I, if I recall correctly about that, give or take one or two. Uh, we were tasked with taking up a significant list, a list of 332 names, and reducing that name down to recommendations that this board would make back to the neighborhood. And then the neighborhood would vote on that. And so we were given three nights, uh, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday night, consecutive nights, and we had two hours each night to figure out how to do this. And that's, that's not very much time to, to get that all accomplished. And so I, I, I recall the first, the first thing we did was spent a little bit of time talking about as a, each person, uh, introduced themselves and talked a little bit about the perspective that they bring. Uh, I find that it's always helpful in these kind of conversations for people to be able to say, here's, here's kind of the perspective I'm coming from. Here's my point of view, uh, if you like. Uh, that's important for the rest of the group to hear. It's also important for me to be able to say that. And so that first night we spent a fair amount of time doing that.

We also spent a fair amount of time talking about expectations. And I'm, I'm one for jumping in with both feet and being pretty forthright and pretty honest, and saying we're gonna have to talk about some things that are difficult, and I would imagine that throughout this process there will be some disagreement and that's okay. How are we gonna handle that? How do you wanna talk to each other? How do you want to make sure that everybody's heard? And so we, we set down a, a really, a page full of guidelines, and I took notes. And then when the meeting was over, I sent those guidelines back to everybody as a draft and said,

here's what I think you guys agreed upon. Please review this and, you know, by ten o'clock tomorrow morning, let me know if I missed anything. The other thing we talked about in this particular context was creating some, uh, if you want, we could call 'em criteria or we could call them considerations because if you don't have some kind of guidelines for the decisions or the recommendations you're going to make, then you're gonna bounce all over. And so we spent a, a fair amount of time talking about how do we want to pick names? How do we, how do we want to consider names? What criteria do we wanna look at when it comes to, is this a name we wanna forward to the community? Is this a name that we think, you know, we, the community might be willing to embrace and, and live with for the next hundred years? And so we talked about that criteria and what that might look like. And so we really took the first meeting, probably at least two thirds of that first meeting to set up expectations, to set up guidelines, and to talk a little bit about who we are as a, a group and, and how we're approaching this, this whole task.

Sam Fuqua: Yeah, that makes sense to me. And it reminds me of that old adage, uh, "You have to go slow to go fast." So taking up most of your first meeting, even with a, a very limited timeframe that you're operating in, it was the best way to do it because it's gonna get you to your outcome faster in the long run.

Steve Charbonneau: I think that's true, and I think that's true in, in every single one of these that I work with. If you're not, if you're not able to set out some, some good expectations and you're not able to get everybody on board, because it, it's not my job to come in and say, here's the expectations for today. That's not my job. My job is to help the group reach a, agreement on expectations, and in this instance, criteria and what that would look like. So yeah, you gotta, you gotta set those out right up front.

Jes Rau: Yeah. And along those same lines, did you use, um, a decision making process to go along with your, with the criteria, like a consensus process or a majority vote type decision making?

Steve Charbonneau: No, uh, not really. We, we talked about that. And I talked about with the group. I said, we can take a vote, uh, and we can make a determination. But I said in this kind of an instance involving the topic we are, involving the emotions, and involving the, the long term ramifications for the decisions we make, I'd like to suggest we try to go with consensus. And immediately the group was very quick to say, yeah, we don't wanna take a vote. A vote seems deci, divisive to us. We, we'd rather work on consensus. And so we talked about what consensus means, uh, and we actually established, okay, here's, here's what we mean when we say consensus. And you want to have that discussion up front because it's, it's a pretty tough discussion to have when you're in the midst of making decisions and you go, oh, um, how are we gonna evaluate this? It's, that's one of those expectations you need to, to set up front.

Sam Fuqua: Since some of the listeners may not be familiar with the consensus model, and because the consensus model shifts depending on the agreements of those involved, can you explain what, what you mean by that?

Steve Charbonneau: So, in this, in this instance, and I think in my, my preferred approach to any of these kind of groups that I work with, and so there's, you know, there's probably a bit of a, a, a, preference on my part. Uh, when I talk about consensus, I tell people consensus is not unanimous. It doesn't mean that everybody's gonna go, "Yep, I love it." Uh, if I can get 80 percent of the people to go, "Yeah, I'm okay with that. I'm, I'm pretty good with that," then I feel that's acceptable. If I can get better than 80 percent, I, I strive for that. I try for that. And if I can accomplish it, then I'm, I'm happy with that. I'm also gonna check, and we particularly did that in, in this case, uh, we, we did not wanna move forward if there was a, an advisory board member who was adamantly opposed. And so as we're looking for consensus in this particular instance, we're looking for people who are going, "Yep, I'm good with that. I like it." And if, if you

can't say, "I'm good with it and I like it," I'm gonna, I'm gonna look at you and I'm gonna go, "Sam, so it's probably not your favorite thing, but is this something you're okay with? Is this something you can live with?" And so there's a, there's sort of a, almost a second spot there, which says, it's not my preferred choice, but I can be okay with it. Uh, in this instance, we were not willing to move forward if anybody said, "No, I can't. I'm just, I, I cannot live with that. It, it doesn't work for me." Um, then we would come back and we'd revisit and we'd talk some more.

Jes Rau: This is a group that worked together quite a bit. Do you feel like they changed throughout the, this process, um, over those three days in the way that they work, uh, for the rest of the time that they're together versus just about this decision?

Steve Charbonneau: This was a one shot advisory board. This was, this was the board put together. I did not have input into the composition of the board. It was a board that was put together through a fairly elaborate process by the, uh, neighborhood association. Um, at that point, and of course they'll be changing their name, but uh, they still are Stapleton United Neighbors. And they have a, a very active board, and they put the advisory board together and tasked them with this responsibility. So this board was together for three nights. Uh, they of course, you know, I guess some of them knew each other, but this board does not have an ongoing responsibility. So knowing that, uh, the first night, it is important to get a sense of who we are and where we're coming from and what's important to everybody. We, we had an excellent representation of gender, ethnicity, uh, age groups. Uh, it was a, it was a well-designed advisory board, and everybody needed to figure out how to coalesce quickly in order to get the tasks done. And I, the, the board was great. I mean, they were absolutely committed to this. We met, you know, two, two and a half hours each night, but they also had a fair amount of work to do during the day in order to prepare for the upcoming meeting that night. And they worked hard at it. They were all involved. They were all fully engaged. They brought their opinions, their ideas, their histories, their stories. They brought all of that to this. It was, for me, it was just an exciting board to work with because it, it coalesced quickly, and I mean, they were, they were really working together.

Jes Rau: That's really neat. And do you feel like the timeframe that they had to work together was a hindrance or was beneficial to have such a concise amount of time to be able to make these decisions?

Steve Charbonneau: There were real challenges with the timeframe. Uh, I, I recall a number of times where a board member or you know, would say, "Okay, we can't do this in this amount of time. We need to go back. We needed to, to do some more work on this. Uh, we need to come back to the, the sunny board and we need to say we can't do this by, you know, Friday, so you need to give us an extra two weeks." Uh, so yeah, there was pushback on that. There was, this is not a reasonable timeframe. We can't do that. Uh, on the other hand, uh, so yeah, there were some downsides to the time limitations. Uh, on the other hand, there were some benefits to the time limitations. Everybody was absolutely focused and they knew, you know, you got so many hours to get this done, so we have to keep pushing. Uh, in that way it was a benefit. It was an advantage. So I think it, it sort of cut both ways. If I were to do it again, I, I would probably say this, this worked best.

Sam Fuqua: Following up on that, I think everybody who's ever run a meeting or even been in a meeting has, has seen these challenges with time management, right? Um, and you talked about the importance at the first meeting of making sure everybody's perspective was heard and everybody was listened to, but you also have to keep it moving, right? So, as we try to offer on this, on this podcast, some practical ideas for folks to use in their own daily conflict management, what can you share with folks, based on your experience in this process and the many, many others you've been involved with, regarding how you

balance, uh, time? People need to feel heard, everybody needs to feel included, but most of these don't go on forever. And in this case, you had a very tight timeframe.

Steve Charbonneau: That's a hard thing to do. Uh, part of it comes with experience. Part of it comes by trusting your intuition. Part of it comes by a lot of mental anxiety before you get into that meeting. I mean, I, I can't tell you how many times I thought in the middle of the night in the week leading up to this, okay, what do we have to cover? How are we gonna get this done? Uh, do we approach it this way? Do we approach it that way? And so, I, for me, I want to, I wanna think about it. I wanna worry about it. I wanna roll it around in my head as much as I can. I wanna be as familiar with all of the pieces. I want to lay out some possible approaches and strategies, and then when I get into it, I've gotta be willing to trust my intuition and make the best decisions I can in the moment. I don't believe you can script it out. But the more you can be prepared for it, the better your intuition's gonna be and the, the better you, you will be at guiding parties, big groups through these kind of things. An example, uh, on that first night, I had in my mind, I wanna get this accomplished. Uh, here's what the agenda is. Here's how we're gonna move through. In fact, I had a, a printed out agenda that I shared with everybody and you know, we ended up jumping around on the agenda. We ended up getting through only part of it. We ended up, you know, assigning homework. Uh, we still got to where we needed to get, and I think we got there in an efficient and in a manner that the, the board would look back on and say, "Wow, that worked really pretty, pretty well," but I had to be adjustable in the moment. And you just have to learn how to make those decisions right as it's happening. It's, it's a challenge and I, I do, I wake up several, several times, several nights prior to these kind of things happening, going, "Oh no. Hope I get this right." It's just, I've done it for 25 years and, and it, it's not a script.

Sam Fuqua: So just one follow up to that. I, I have been in large group meetings where, uh, it is more highly scripted, and in fact there's a time limit allowed to each person for speaking. Like, here's your two minutes, Sam, and then Jes, here's your two minutes. Uh, if I'm hearing you correctly, that doesn't really work very well.

Steve Charbonneau: It doesn't work at these kind of a, situations because sometimes you don't need two minutes to say what you need to say, and sometimes you need five to seven minutes. Uh, it's my job to stay right on top of that. It's my job to summarize and move from person to person. If it feels like you're going in circles, it's my job to jump in and say, hey Sam, here's what I think I heard. I, I gotta keep us moving. And I need the flexibility to be able to do that. Uh, it's, it's not something I feel I can script. And maybe for some people it, it works perfectly fine, but it's my meeting and I run that meeting, but I run it benevolently and I run it in a way that, that everyone needs to be heard.

Jes Rau: For folks who are, uh, going into those types of processes, what's helpful for them to come with in terms of their mindset or their way of thinking?

Steve Charbonneau: I tell people in a, an email ahead of time. So part of this is preparing your group ahead of time, so I will, I will probably send a couple of emails at least ahead of time saying, here's kind of our task, here's what we need to do, here's what I want you to think about. Uh, I, I emphasize always that, you know, a huge part of our responsibility is to know how to listen in a way that I understand what it is you're saying. I don't have to agree. I don't, I don't have to accept it, but I have to understand it. And so I, I spend a little prep time. Uh, sometimes it's on phone, but usually that's difficult. So it's almost always through email and I, I will go through the task, I will go through possible approaches, and I will spend a fair amount of time saying, you gotta be able to listen. You gotta hear each other. I don't care if you agree. I don't care if you disagree. But you do have to hear, and you do have to understand.

Jes Rau: On the facilitator side, um, you mentioned the agreements, the guidelines that you come up with, with the group. How do you facilitate situations where maybe people aren't showing up ready to listen, ready to understand, not really following those agreements? What are some of the strategies you use?

Steve Charbonneau: So part of that is, uh, again, in, in my role as it's happening, if I feel like somebody's trying to say something, and the rest of the group or, or even one or two members of the group is not hearing and understanding, I, I'll jump in and I'll say, "Wait, wait. Let me, let me stop you. I need you to back up on that. I'm not sure we're all getting that," or, "Here's what I heard you say. I, I don't know that I understand that. Can you say a little more about it?" Or, I, I will use, you know, good listening skills to help the rest of the group hear what I think they may not be hearing. And even in this instance, there's, there's nuances of, of considerations that people of color had in this group that maybe the rest of everybody didn't quite understand. And so I want to take some time with that. I wanna back up. I wanna say, wait, I wanna make sure we get this. Um, let's not be too quick to jump in and offer either an idea or an opinion. And I'll, I'll, I'll keep redirecting it. I'll keep using the listening skills. I'll keep, I'll keep driving back to helping people understand. Because, even if I come in with the best of intentions, these are emotional situations and I just might not be able to hear everything or understand everything I need to. And that's, that's part of my job. I mean, I think a very, a very small part of my job is, is that of directing a process from a sort of an agenda standpoint. There's, there's so many other pieces involved in, you know, successful, successfully facilitating a process like that. That's my responsibility out. Everybody has to understand what we're all saying, and they have to be able to hear it whether they agree or not. You gotta hear and understand. Otherwise, we can't get to the right end point.

Sam Fuqua: I appreciate the, you know, throughout this conversation, you've, you've emphasized the need to be flexible as a facilitator and really be in tune to, to each individual, and what, where the conversations are going. In this case, uh, this Stapleton renaming process, were there any big surprises, anything that caught you off guard?

Steve Charbonneau: I learned a lot about the history behind the different names. I, I found that really interesting. And I found the dynamic of the dynamics within the group. I find, I found that helpful to understand. It, it gave me a different perspective to hear young people say, well, here's what, here's what I think, and here's what that means to, to me, and here's why I think this name is really important. Uh, the same thing would be true of any of the different components. I mean, we, like I said, we had, we had age, we had gender, we had culture, we had ethnicity, we had, yeah, I don't know that I was surprised or taken off guard. I, I did learn a lot. It was a, it was a fascinating learning experience, just hearing the, the dynamics behind what each person brought, and their opinions of, of what names were appropriate and what names were not appropriate.

Jes Rau: It seems to me like we're going to see more of this. That this is, I mean, there's already conversations about renaming parks and, um, reevaluating street names, uh, at least in the Denver area, but I also know across the country. So I'm, I'm imagining we'll be talking about this a lot more. Um, to really reckon with that and make some different decisions, are there any bits of just some lessons learned as you were going through the process that might be helpful for either participants or the facilitators to think about? I know listening was one that you mentioned, but are there other things as well?

Steve Charbonneau: I can't separate listening from understanding. It's one thing to hear the words. It's another thing to understand where the other person is actually coming from at a, a heart, a gut, a, an emotional level. And in these kind of conversations, that's unavoidable. This isn't just a conversation about facts and information and data. This is a conversation that arouses emotion and feelings. And so being

willing to accept that and being willing to, to live with that, I think is, is incredibly important. Uh, again, I, uh, it's not that you have to agree. It's not that you have to view it in the same way, but these are tough conversations and they require a whole different level of, I, I would say getting it, figuring it out, understanding it. So I think, I think that's gonna be important wherever we have these conversations. We, we're headed into, I think, a, a number of difficult conversations around a number of, of tough issues. And so hearing, understanding, and, and I would say getting it at a, a significant level is really important. Being willing to have those conversations is going to be important. Being intuitive and flexible is going to be important. Taking into consideration the views that are, are really very different than yours, uh, for any number of reasons is important. And then I think bringing flexibility, uh, it, it, it, it doesn't all belong to one person or one group or one perspective. This is, these are things we're gonna have to learn how to, to find a, an acceptable middle or a consensus on if we go back to our, our original discussion, and there's a bit of, there's a bit of give and take in that, and that's, that's gonna be necessary to get where we need to get.

Sam Fuqua: Steve Charbonneau, thank you so much for, for speaking with us.

Steve Charbonneau: Thank you for giving me the time. I really appreciate it.

Sam Fuqua: Steve Charbonneau is a longtime mediator in Denver. He facilitated the community process that resulted in changing the name of a Denver neighborhood that was called Stapleton, to its new name, Central Park.

Our podcast is Well, That Went Sideways! We produce new episodes twice a month, and you can find them wherever you get your podcasts, and on our website, sidewayspod.org. We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website. That's sidewayspod.org. Our program is produced by Mary Zinn, Jes Rau, and me, Sam Fuqua. Our theme music is by Mike Stewart. And this podcast is a partnership with The Conflict Center, a Denver-based nonprofit that provides practical skills and training for addressing everyday conflicts. Find out more at conflictcenter.org.