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Recent news reports bruise our spirits with repeated accounts of conflicts that reflect little hope for resolution through dialogue and mutual understanding. It appears to matter little whether we are watching events in the community of Ferguson, Missouri, or studying conflicts overseas that involve nations or entire regions. The stories seemingly share the same discouraging ringtone – the significant costs of our inability to talk and act across differences.

At the heart of the matter lie communication challenges. If individuals, communities, and societies can’t find better ways to communicate, ruinous consequences will continue.

At IEI, as an extension of NC State’s proud land grant service, our mission is to enhance North Carolina’s long-term economic competitiveness using the tools of research and collaborative problem-solving spanning disciplines, sectors, and regions. The recent news event have caused us to ask ourselves two key questions: Under what circumstance do our state’s residents come to IEI in search of common ground on difficult questions? Do they leave our work having built consensus around key goals and with well-defined action objectives for moving forward together?

As we debated those questions, we realized that there are some things IEI serves to help North Carolinians do well and other areas where we need to improve. Here are the actions that appear to be working:

Creating a neutral space for difficult conversations. For 29 years, IEI’s Emerging Issues Forum has focused the state’s attention on contested issues. The Forum attracts leaders from business, education, non-profits, and government, as well as students from across the state, and you engage these critical issues from a broad array of perspectives. The Forum stands as a rather remarkable example of North Carolinians’ enduring good will, and the continued success year after year dispels any notion
that you have become unwilling to work together to bridge differences.

**Bringing credible, diverse ideas into the room.** Repeatedly, as participants in IEI’s processes, you tell us that the opportunity to engage meaningfully with each other on public issues proves deeply satisfying and significant. In fact, you remain not just willing, but eager, to come together to discuss public issues if diverse ideas are presented and differences of opinion respected. This is true even if the topic is complex and potentially divisive.

**Taking our stakeholder audience from thinking to doing.** As participants in IEI’s work, you have never agreed on everything. For almost 30 years, however, you have found ways to work collaboratively to strengthen North Carolina’s economic competitiveness. We have witnessed thousands of you engaged in this work, and we applaud each and every one of you. Please take a minute to review the sidebar, [Featured Link](#), where you will find a summary of some of the things you’ve worked with us to accomplish in just the last four years. I hope you feel proud of this work and of the fact that you did it together.

At the same time as we celebrate our successes we know, if we are to reach the heart of the matter when it comes to successful communication, there are areas where IEI must offer you improved support. And, we will. Here are some of the enhancements to expect in coming months as we prepare for the 2015 Emerging Issues Forum.

**A focus on making our communications to you more contextual.** The beauty of our work lies in the diversity of perspectives we bring together. We will do a much
better job sharing information that reflects differing contexts driving those perspectives. For example, we often arrange our focus groups that lead up to the Forum by sector or geography, and although these groups study the same issues, they often reflect widely varying perspectives. By reporting not just on areas of consensus but also on these different perspectives, we will help you gain a greater understanding of the many ways in which a given topic may play out across the state.

**A change in the patterns of interaction.** Although we continue to believe that it is important for IEI’s audiences to hear from experts, we plan to allow more time for conversation and exchange among attendees of our in-person gatherings, including the Forum, and of our online events.

**Emphasizing that decisions involve tradeoffs.** In addition to publicizing decisions made or agreements reached in our convenings, we must give more attention to creating awareness of what is sacrificed when any particular course of action is chosen. What are stakeholders willing to give up in order to pursue a particular option? We will engage our working groups, convened as we build up to each year’s Forum, in tradeoffs activity, and we will share the group’s analysis of various tradeoffs with the larger Forum audience.

None of these improvements at IEI will bring us world peace, and the saddening news stories will surely continue. That said, I am confident that together we will ensure that North Carolina has “just a bit” more capacity to do what seems to be impossible in so many other places.

Warmly, Anita