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Bill Mathis must have the patience of Job.

Granted, the management and industrial psychologist probably has not endured the specific world-class trials suffered by the biblical figure. And, after all, he does get paid partly to do exactly that: be patient. Nevertheless, in the realm of professional management facilitation, his endurance certainly appears to be top-notch.

As an object lesson, take one of Mathis' most recent clients, the La Canada-Flintridge City Council. Just a couple of hours into the council's team-building session July 20 at the Lanterman House, one council member finished speaking, and the group suddenly and randomly broke up. The group was taking a break, but it was an unplanned one, and one not made immediately apparent to Mathis or about half the council. Leave it to Mathis to turn lemons into lemonade: He used the episode as an example of one of the council's core problems, something he described as a lack of focus, "a lack of cohesiveness and a lack of discipline in working within guidelines and rules -- they don't have any. They're just responding and reacting," Mathis said.

Fortunately, that's not an unsolvable problem, something Mathis emphasized throughout the day-long team-building session. Neither are the other problems the council faces, including a lack of trust between its two factions and the frequent presumption by some council members that their counterparts are not being forthright.

Best of all, the news here is that the La Canada-Flintridge City Council is not unique, at least according to Mathis. Although the council is regularly criticized for not being able to get along as well as some citizens think it should, Mathis said the team-building meeting, and the issues it brought up, were no different from the ones he handles with city councils all over the state. Those issues often focus on the personalities of the people involved, and as is true for people everywhere, professional counseling sometimes is needed.

The City Council took a big step in reaching a consensus to pay for a facilitator, then essentially airing its dirty laundry in public (the council had a quorum, so the session was open to the public and the media). That took a lot of courage and smarts, and council members deserve credit for making it happen. If that effort towards trying to make things better continues, great strides will be made before Mathis returns for a follow-up visit in a few months.

And if the council needs still more help, they appear to have the right man for the job.