How can an inter-agency dispute become a generative conversation based on iterative feedback?

The Request. A division director of a federal agency requested help in planning and facilitating a cross-agency task. The task force was made up of members from a community planning council and managers within the government agency. The Council consisted of 25 volunteer community agency representatives who were responsible for directing federal and state funds to agencies and programs that support economically disadvantaged families. The Council support staff were funded by and employees of the federal agency. The basic charge of the 6-member task force was to develop written recommendations for agency staffing of The Council. The members of the task force wanted both organizations to have a cooperative relationship that develops excellent services without stepping on each others toes and is seen externally as a partnership. Clarifying roles and responsibilities, consensus building and dealing with inevitable differences in interests were all a part of the scope of work. The deliverable was to have a signed Memo of Understanding of roles, an organizational chart detailing FTEs, supervisory and reporting relationships, and work descriptions of what the staff should and should not be doing.

Larger Context. There was a continuing and growing disagreement for about a year over roles and responsibilities of the support staff. The Council Committee Chairpersons were not getting the quality and amount of work from their federal support staff that they expected. The staff believed that they were being asked to do things that were outside the scope of their job and held to nearly impossible standards given all there was to accomplish. This culminated in some heated interactions that were becoming quite public. There was no process for resolving these disagreements and so strained interpersonal relationships were getting in the way of clarifying respective roles, responsibilities, expectations, outcomes and authorities.

Consulting Intervention. At it's first meeting the task force was able to share current feelings, brainstorm a list of questions to be answered as well as a brief discussion of each, and agree on a draft set of steps and decision process, stakeholders to be kept in the loop and final products with deadlines. The basic process that was agreed upon was a Delphi Technique[1] This is a process by which a questionnaire is designed and sent to a respondent group; the reactions from the group members are summarized and based on these, a new questionnaire is resent for the respondents to reevaluate the responses once more.

A first draft of a questionnaire of proposed roles and responsibilities was developed from letters, issue papers, meeting minutes, memos and retreat notes issued from both the Agency and the Council and Committees during the prior 6 months. The items from those documents that seemed appropriate to the key questions identified by the task force were recorded in two columns: One for the Council roles, and one for the agency. The directions to the task force for providing feedback was key to airing important interests. Here are the directions that were given to the task force:

> There were 12 roles mentioned in the materials. Please focus your review on those roles that are mandated for the council or the agency. Review each responsibility and record your comments in the left and right margins.
> If you disagree with something or have a concern about something, make the necessary change that will make that item more acceptable to you.
> > • If you have a question about something, list your question and your answer
> > • If something is unclear, make it clearer by providing an example.
> > • If something is missing, add it to the list.
> > • If you totally disagree with something, cross it out or reword it.
> > • If you feel something is particularly important, put an asterisk (*) next to it.
> > • If you see two items that are essentially the same, say that.

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For any change that you make, please note the item number you are referring to and say why you want those changes made. That way, others will understand your reasoning and interests.

The task force went through this process of refining the results six times, sharing the results and collecting feedback from other stakeholders, most notable the Council Executive Committee and the Agency Staff. At several points in the process, the task force met to resolve any remaining issues and added a key staff member to the meetings. Interim and final drafts of responsibilities were presented to the Council as a whole. A memo of agreement was signed by executive leaders from both organizations.

Last Line. Where clarity of interests and expectations between disagreeing and somewhat antagonistic yet interdependent groups is necessary, a process that may be useful to focus the discussion is the Delphi Technique.