

Best Practices for Collaboration

Collaborative processes include individuals representing an array of often-conflicting interests and views who come together to meet the goals of all group members. Collaboration may be desirable to achieve an agreement that might not be reached otherwise, particularly in the area of environmental policy issues where widely divergent views are closely held by opposing parties, and stalemate has become the norm. A successful agreement is one which will have legitimacy, can be implemented fully, and can be monitored to ensure that the results are that which was intended (Dukes and Firehock 2001¹).

A collaborative partnership is about using shared values as the basis of an agreement: it is not about compromise or cutting deals. Involving diverse stakeholders in the planning, implementation and monitoring of projects encourages ownership by all participants, which in turn facilitates implementation. Collaborative processes can build trust between parties, a necessary condition for problem solving to occur, and can lead to innovation and shared excitement about new solutions to old problems.

Experience has shown that successful collaborations require adherence to a set of best practices. They must be based on mutual respect, transparency, consultation, and deliberation from the onset.

Before agreeing to participate in a proposed collaborative agreement, potential participants need to consider:

Does the effort offer opportunities to preserve and enhance environmental protection or other values of interest that may otherwise be difficult to accomplish?

Is the process that is being proposed or developed likely to be fair and effective? At no time should environmental and public participation laws be circumvented, avoided, or compromised during the collaborative process.

Participants should have considerable say in the design of the process, including determining their own representation, identifying the appropriate sources of scientific and technical advice, and choosing a facilitator.

In order for an organization to be suited for participation, the group should be prepared to invest considerable time towards achieving a successful result.

Setting the Stage for Success

Problems that arise in collaborative processes are frequently due to the failure to pay sufficient attention to setting up the process. A **protocol** to guide the work of the collaboration should be developed and adopted through consensus. The protocol should include the following:

- Goals and scope of the process

¹ Dukes, E. F. and Firehock, K. 2001. Collaboration: A Guide for Environmental Advocates. Univ. of Virginia, The Wilderness Society, and National Audubon Society. Charlottesville, VA.

- List of participants
- Identify whether the meetings will be open to observers, set rules for media coverage, set rules for appointing alternates
- Definition of roles and responsibilities for members: all should have an equal voice and status
- Responsibilities of members to communicate with their constituents
- Rules for sharing information during and after meetings
- Ground rules for behavior
- The decision making process must be determined at the outset. Consensus generally means that all interests that are represented in the collaborative process can live with and support all decisions made by the collaborative body. Decision making by consensus can follow various models. Under the interest based caucus model, ultimate decisions are made at the caucus level. A decision may be made by a caucus to adopt a position even if one member of that caucus does not agree. Some models only require a majority of the caucus to agree. In the absence of a caucus based collaborative model, if one member cannot live with the decision, consensus may be blocked entirely, but the group may decide to continue to work on the issue in the hopes of ultimately reaching consensus
- Meeting organization and administration – frequency and site of meetings, length of meetings and agendas, mileposts for assessing progress, deadlines, and cost and expenses for participants and facilitators (logistics)
- Timetable
- Process to select a facilitator

In order to be successful, the protocol must also ensure that:

- Key interests are adequately represented, including those who may not live locally;
- Participant selection is not based on the participant being perceived as malleable or easily influenced. Likewise, groups perceived as “too radical” are not excluded;
- All participants are committed to making a good faith effort to enable the effort to succeed;
- Participants must report to the groups that they represent to ensure their buy-in on any decisions;
- The means for inclusion of scientific and technical information and monitoring is identified;
- What will constitute an agreement and how it will be carried forward are both defined at the beginning of the process;
- Legal requirements are examined; for example, is a Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) charter required?
- Linkage with key public decision-makers is maintained throughout the project; and

- Responsibilities and constraints on participants are recognized.

Facilitation: Critical to Success

It is desirable to hire a professional independent facilitator at the onset, after the group participants have been identified. Selection of the facilitator and the responsibilities for the facilitator should be made by the group or a subcommittee of the group, and approved by group consensus. The facilitator can then help to design the protocol and run meetings. The facilitator will also provide the means for recording the meetings, prepare agendas, help to craft agreements, arrange for speakers, and handle communications between meetings.

Create a common archive of presentations from the science forums, research results, and references that address the management issues to be addressed throughout the region. Structure the archive so that it can be easily shared among Forest Service staff throughout the region, other agencies, and interested stakeholders.

Create systems and opportunities for shared learning among specialists and other stakeholders involved in the forest plan revision at the regional and national forest levels. The webinars on responding to climate change that have been hosted by the USFWS (http://training.fws.gov/CSP/Resources/climate_change_webinars/safeguarding_wildlife_cc_archives.html) could serve as an example of both the technology/system to use to deliver the program and a topic area of interest. Coordinating training opportunities among state or federal agencies should be explored.

Provide training to resource staff and decision-makers on the function and operation of teams, including roles and responsibilities, values, cohesion, and collaboration.

Summary

Collaboration science is well documented in today's literature. A full utilization of this literature is recommended in both determining group participation and in supporting active engagement. The use of the guide to collaboration developed by Dukes and Firehock (2001) is also likely to increase the success of collaboration.