

ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY

The Discussion Leader's Guide to Public Issue Dispute Resolution and Participatory Decision-Making

Volume 3

COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Often when discussing an issue, individuals will focus their attention on only one or two proposals. As they move toward evaluation, they view the discussion as a choice between alternative positions and quickly take sides. Because all their energies are concentrated on the two positions, no effort is made to understand the interests behind the two positions. In such a contentious atmosphere the choice they face will likely lead to a win/lose outcome, an impasse, or a compromise that satisfies neither side.

In contrast, a discussion that allows for an understanding of each stakeholder's underlying interests:

- Moves people away from contending positions
- Promotes mutual education
- Allows a cooperative atmosphere to develop
- Sets the stage for reframing the issue
- Encourages the generation of multiple options
- Permits the search for a creative solution

PRINCIPLES OF COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

One of the most effective ways to solve a public issue is through a collaborative process. Collaboration is an inclusionary process that promotes lateral communication and shared decision making. The following principles have been identified from case studies of successful processes¹:

1. **Purpose-Driven.** People need a reason to participate in the process.
2. **Inclusive.** All stakeholders with a significant interest in the issues should be involved in the collaborative process.
3. **Educational.** The process relies on mutual education of all participants.
4. **Voluntary.** The stakeholders who are affected or interested participate voluntarily.
5. **Self-Designed.** All stakeholders have an equal opportunity to participate in designing the collaborative process. The process must be explainable and designed to meet the circumstances and needs of the situation.
6. **Flexible.** Flexibility should be designed into the process to accommodate changing issues, data needs, political environment, and programmatic constraints such as time and meeting arrangements.
7. **Egalitarian.** All stakeholders have equal access to relevant information and the opportunity to participate effectively throughout the process.
8. **Respectful.** Acceptance of the diverse values, interests, and knowledge of the stakeholders involved in the collaborative process is essential.
9. **Accountable.** The participants are accountable both to their constituencies and to the process that they have agreed to establish.
10. **Time Limited.** Realistic deadlines are necessary throughout the process.
11. **Achievable.** Commitments to implementation and effective monitoring are essential parts of any agreement.

¹ The principles of collaborative processes presented here were developed by a Canadian National Task Force on Consensus and Sustainability. They can be found in *Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future: Putting Principles into Practice*, by Gerald Cormick, Norman Dale, Paul Emond, S. Glenn Sigurdson, and Barry D. Stuart (National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, Ottawa, 1996).

What Makes an Issue Open to Collaboration?

In general, a public issue is amenable to collaboration if it contains the following elements²:

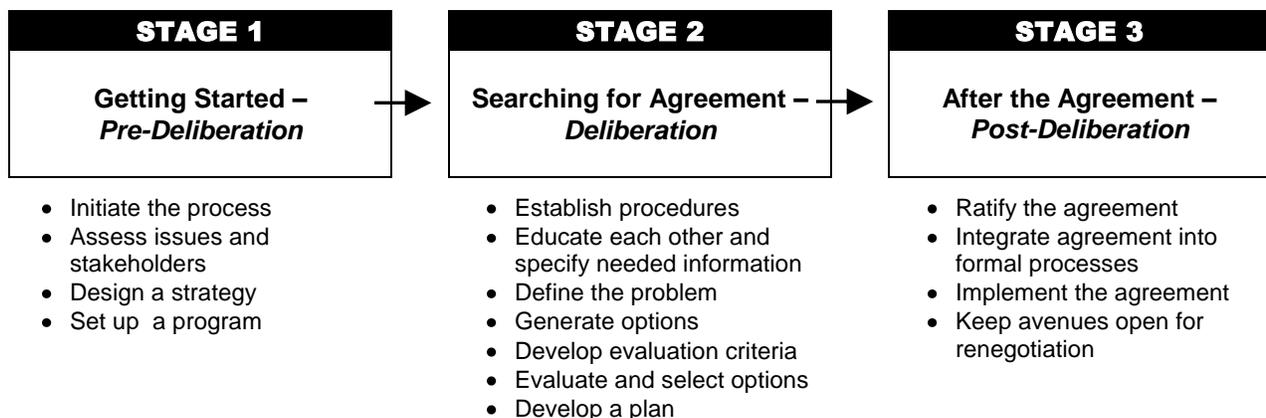
- Stakeholders are not happy with the status-quo.
- Stakeholders are interdependent and must rely on the cooperation of one another to meet their goals and satisfy their needs.
- Stakeholders are able to influence one another. They are capable of taking (or preventing) actions of one another to meet their goals or satisfy their needs
- It is possible to identify the primary stakeholders and involve them in the problem solving process.
- Deadlines or time constraints pressure the stakeholders into sharing the desire for a prompt solution.
- Stakeholders view alternative procedures or outcomes to a negotiated settlement as undesirable or unattainable.
- Stakeholders are likely to agree on issues in the dispute.
- Real interests of the stakeholders are not entirely incompatible.
- External influences exist which encourage the stakeholders to reach a negotiation

Alternatively, it is useful to know when collaborative processes should *not* be used. Collaborative processes are probably not appropriate when:

- The convenor's sole motivation is to create an *appearance* of openness or consensus.
- A crucial principal is at stake over which defeat by one of the stakeholders would be preferable to any appearance of compromise.
- Any stakeholders believe their interests would be fully satisfied without negotiating.
- Limitations on information, time, and other practical considerations are too severe

STAGES OF THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

A typical collaborative process has three well-defined stages³, each containing a number of steps, tasks or objectives (see the chart below). The facilitator's role in each step is described in later issues of the "Engaging Your Community" series (volume numbers are indicated in parenthesis).



² Moore, Christopher. *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1986.

³ Lawrence Susskind and Jeffrey Cruikshankin their book, *Breaking the Impasse, Consensual Approaches to Resolving Public Disputes* (Basic Books, Inc, New York, 1987), outline three major stages of the negotiation process. These are namely: prenegotiation, negotiation, and postnegotiation. Here, the term "negotiation" has been generalized to "deliberation" to incorporate other forms of collaboration. Finally, the discussion incorporates the work of Susan Carpenter in presenting a programmatic approach to public dispute resolution (*Solving Community Problems by Consensus, Program for Community Problem Solving, Washington, D.C., 1990*).

Stage 1: Getting Started: *The Pre-Deliberation Phase*

A stakeholder or a trusted outsider raises the possibility of collaboration and initiates the process. Following initiation, the pre-deliberation or planning stage should be carried out with a group of knowledgeable and committed stakeholders who are willing to participate in the process from the beginning. During this stage, the objectives of the collaborative process are to:

Assess the issues (Volume 4)

- Identify conditions for collaboration.
- Develop a clear description of the issues that need to be addressed.
- Frame the problem as a joint search for resolution of the issue: "How can we...?"

Identify stakeholders (Volume 5)

- Determine what (or whose) interests are at stake.
- Identify who can affect - and who is affected by - the issue
- Contact stakeholders and determine their needs for participating in a collaborative process.

Design a strategy (Volumes 6 and 7)

- Consider the most productive format: committee, negotiating team or conference format.
- Agree on process steps.
- Identify roles and who might fill them: chairperson, facilitator, recorder, technical resources, meeting logistics, etc.
- Plan your time frame.
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Set up a program (Volume 7)

- Decide on logistical details: where and when to meet, agenda, etc.
- Draft the meeting ground rules and protocols (also called a group charter, meeting plan or convening document).

Stage 2: Searching for Agreement: *The Deliberation Stage*

Once all the stakeholders have been contacted, the first meeting convened, and the protocols ratified, the participants can begin to deliberate the substantive issues. The facilitator's role in the deliberation stage is described in Volumes 8 and 10 of this series. The stakeholders' roles are described in a special issue for citizens called *Dealing with Conflict in Your Community*.

Establish procedures

- With the whole group, ratify the meeting ground rules and protocols drafted in the planning phase. Make changes where necessary.

Educate each other

- Share concerns related to the topic.
- Identify what is given.
- Identify what is understood.
- Identify sub-issues.
- Identify and share interests -- reasons, needs, concerns and motivations underlying participants' positions -- rather than assert positions.

Define the problem

- Define the present situation.
- Define the desired future.

Specify information needs

- Identify technical background information that is pertinent to the issue.
- Identify information that is available and information that is needed.
- Agree on methods for generating answers to relevant technical questions, or a path to follow even if no technical consensus exists.

Educate each other

- Field trips.
- Collecting data/soliciting reports.
- Briefings.
- Interviews.

Generate options

- Use task forces for larger groups.
- Bring in the public.
- Brainstorm.
- Use expert opinion.

Develop criteria for option evaluation

- Feasibility
- Fairness
- Efficiency

Evaluate options

- Priority matrix
- Goal achievement.

Reach agreements

- Building block
- Single text
- Agreement in principle

Develop a written plan

- Document areas of agreement to ensure a common understanding of the participants' accord.
- Develop a plan of action: what, how, when, where, who.

Stage 3: After the Agreement is Reached: *The Post-Deliberation Phase*

Once an acceptable solution has been identified, it must be approved and implemented by all responsible stakeholders. During Stage 3, the objectives of the collaborative process are to:

Ratify the agreement (Volume 9)

- Stakeholders get support for the plan from organizations that have a role in carrying it out.
- Each organization follows its own internal procedures as it reviews and adopts the plan.

Integrate the agreement into the public decision-making process (Volume 9)

- Governing bodies and agencies not directly included in the process have been kept informed during earlier phases of the process.
- Plan is considered and acted upon by the relevant agencies and governing bodies for implementation.

Implement the agreement (Volume 9)

- Maintain communication and collaboration as the plan is carried out.
- Monitor your results.
- Renegotiate, if necessary.
- Celebrate your success

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