

BUILDING COLLABORATION AND CONSENSUS ON PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES

Ad Hoc Working Group on the Future of Collabora- tion and Consensus on Public Policy Issues

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The Ad Hoc Working Group on the Future of Collaboration and Consensus on Public Policy Issues is a group of professionals who represent diverse approaches to collaboration in public policy debates, but share a distinctive professional mission: helping people work together in the face of serious differences on issues of public importance. Collaboration means parties working together to achieve a common goal. The process may include forms of dispute resolution such as mediation or conciliation, or it may employ public participation techniques such as dialogues and deliberative processes. The Working Group has come together to advance the understanding and use of collaboration in the public sphere, and has produced this working paper and vision outlining the characteristics of various approaches.

Collaboration Works

From resolving neighborhood conflicts to setting national policy, collaboration can change the way controversial public issues are addressed by creating mechanisms and building forums to increase mutual understanding, bridge differences, and foster joint action. The use of these practices has expanded dramatically over the past 40 years leading to their use at every level of governance in our society. Collaboration has been used to make progress on some of the most difficult, complex, and contentious issues. Its use has grown precisely because it works.

Yet, too often people and organizations still do not work together. In many cases, the problems that need to be addressed involve complex networks of individuals, agencies, and private interests. As a result, no one entity is able to address the problem successfully. Either important public decisions are not made in a timely manner or, if they are, affected parties may be dissatisfied with the content or the process used. Without solid support for decisions, implementation will be difficult and the wrangling will continue, and may increase.

Vision

Our vision is for inclusive, effective, and fair collaboration to become a routine part of governance and civic life. Increasing the use of collaborative practices will help achieve a fairer and more inclusive society that will strengthen our democracy; it will also result in better decisions being made and implemented effectively.

Approaches to Collaboration

Approaches to collaboration vary depending on the goal to be achieved. They are often used in combination and with contemporary communication technologies. Three key approaches are described below.

- **Improved understanding and involvement** can occur in processes that bring together people who are divided on contentious issues to engage in constructive conversation. These dialogue and mutual education forums are best used when relationships are strained, and progress is unlikely without greater understanding, trust, and a shared goal among the parties. Dialogue efforts can also create the opportunity for opponents in political controversies to set aside divisive rhetoric, identify some shared concerns, and identify feasible directions for problem solving.
- **Consensus agreement** efforts bring together public officials and representatives of those who would be affected by the resulting decision to develop agreements on matters of public policy. Consensus processes are most useful when individuals and organizations with diverse interests want to negotiate stable agreements to thorny public policy issues. Usually facilitated by impartial third parties with experience and training in public policy dispute resolution, these efforts use negotiation and collaborative problem solving to build agreements.
- **Collaborative action** brings together the ideas and resources of multiple entities to guide the management of a public decision, or to collaboratively build, implement, or oversee jointly developed solutions. Collaborative action recognizes that complex public problems often cannot be solved by one institution, but rather multiple organizations need to work together effectively on specific solutions.

The approaches described above have at least two significant benefits: (1) They are often used to improve civic engagement because they involve a broad range of people and organizations in meaningful, productive, and respectful ways to ensure public decisions are responsive to public needs. These approaches often create multiple forums to educate the public about issues and seek guidance on how an issue might be addressed. The outcomes usually include a broader understanding of the issues which in turn builds public will for collaborative action. (2) The resulting decisions and their implementation tap the collective expertise of the public and private sectors in solving public issues, and as a result they have proven to produce better public policy outcomes.

More information about specific tools and applications is included in the list of members' web sites on page 6.

What Defines Collaborative Practices?

Bringing people together for constructive conversation about public issues is not new; indeed it is probably one of the oldest human activities. There is a wide range of existing tools and processes for collaboration work in the public arena. The Working Group has identified several hallmarks of good collaborative process that reflect the notion that creating forums for genuine joint efforts produces significant benefits.

Direct interaction and communication. Opportunities for constructive interaction are at the core of collaboration and dispute resolution. While communications and internet technologies help reach large numbers of people, they are usually best used to augment face-to-face dialogue and problem solving.

Diversity of views. Inclusive approaches to participation make sure all points of view among those affected are welcome and encouraged. Extra effort is frequently needed to ensure that sufficiently diverse views are represented, giving everyone the confidence that the major perspectives will be thoroughly discussed.

“Done with, not done to.” Collaboration creates forums where parties can work together voluntarily and have a voice in shaping the process itself. Suspicion and conflict are reduced if the structure and goals are transparent and not open to manipulation by one interest.

Timely information. Timely information that is accessible, both in terms of availability and understanding, helps ensure that all parties are empowered to be full participants and that factual issues are resolved in ways that are expeditious and clear to all.

Mutually beneficial results. Participants in any effort ask the basic question: does this outcome help achieve my goals? Collaborative efforts consciously work to ensure that the results are beneficial for all.

Focus on results and action. A good collaborative process keeps participants focused on achieving sustainable results – whether that result is improved relationships or actions that resolve problems. Clarity about the purpose of the effort is critical to matching the process to the desired results.

Examples of Approaches to Collaboration and Consensus

Dialogue and education to improve understanding

Development in the Northern Forests of New England precipitated years of conflict over preservation and logging among forest advocates, timber corporations, and other affected groups. At a seminal retreat away from media attention, these groups were able to clear up misunderstandings, test long held assumptions about each other's "hidden agendas" and goals, and identify some useful communication practices that they took into their more public conversations. Similarly, dialogue and analysis have been used by organizations like the League of Women Voters on controversial issues, like immigration and affordable housing, to examine issues and develop nationwide and local understanding of complex policy decisions.

Consensus agreements

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the National Park Service (NPS) were required under the Overflights Act of 1986 to "substantially restore natural quiet to Grand Canyon National Park" through regulation of aircraft over the Park. The two agencies had been unable to implement the act over twenty years, and in 2005 sought mediation assistance for the design and facilitation of a joint regulatory negotiation process. The process produced an improved working relationship, resolution of several key planning issues, including agreement on the noise model to be used, definitions of key terms, and an agreement on several elements in a preferred alternative for managing park overflights. These agreements represented a regulatory and policy breakthrough.

Collaborative action for joint initiatives

State and local efforts that have successfully worked to improve outcomes for children and families are often anchored by collaborative initiatives that bring together public and private organizations serving children, youth and families with major systems such as education, juvenile justice, workforce, and welfare organizations to work on joint strategies. The collaborative processes help participants work across disciplines to implement their missions in concert and thereby effect change. Other examples of collaborative action include inter-organizational strategic planning to address joint problems, like climate change, growth management, corporate-environmental partnerships on recycling, and other public issues.

Expertise in Collaboration on Public Issues

Effective collaborative processes rarely happen by chance. They require intentional, skilled leadership where someone, whether a public leader, a staff person, or a professional in collaboration, consensus, or public dialogue and deliberation works with the interested people to ensure that the hallmarks outlined above are used to shape and guide the process.

Historically, professionals with specific education, training and experience have guided many collaboration and dispute resolution processes because effectively initiating and managing them presents significant challenges. These professionals often serve as impartial facilitators and mediators, designing meetings and processes, guiding the interaction throughout, and playing the unique role of ensuring that the process is collaboratively designed, well managed, and constructive in orientation.

As the use of these practices has expanded so have the kinds of persons who bring professional skills to the work. Often community, business, governmental and legislative leaders play roles in convening and leading forums for collaboration. As these process initiators become more skilled and interested in building collaborative forums, professionals in collaboration often become coaches and teachers about the effective skills and behaviors inherent in building collaborative structures.

In general, however, the higher the level of controversy and the more complex the situation, the stronger is the need for impartiality and strong professional experience with collaboration..

Advancing Collaboration and Consensus on Public Issues

The Ad Hoc Working Group on the Future of Collaboration and Consensus on Public Policy Issues will work over the next year to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges and obstacles to greater use of collaborative approaches. It will foster efforts to hold up a mirror to the professionals in the broad field of collaboration, consciously examine collaborative work, and develop appropriate strategies to further the field. The Group will strive to create strategic alliances among providers and users of collaborative processes, expecting that what is learned will lead to specific strategies such as communications and awareness campaigns, efforts to create legislative and programmatic frameworks, and development of strategies that build capacity for collaboration.

Ad Hoc Working Group on the Future of Collaboration and Consensus on Public Policy

Working Group Members and Web Sites

Name	Organization	Web Sites
Peter Adler	Keystone Center	www.keystone.org
Gail Bingham	RESOLVE	www.resolve.org
Chris Carlson	Policy Consensus Institute	www.policyconsensus.org
Susan Carpenter		
Cindy Cook	Adamant Accord	www.adamantaccord.com
Frank Dukes	Institute for Environmental Negotiation, University of VA	www.virginia.edu/ien
Don Edwards	Justice & Sustainability Associates	
Michael Elliott	GA Institute of Technology & Environmental/Public Policy Section, Association for Conflict Resolution	www.acresolution.org
Kirk Emerson	US. Institute for ECR	www.ecr.org
Pat Field	Consensus Building Institute	www.cbuilding.org
Cameron Fraser	International Association of Facilitators	www.iaf-world.org
Philip Harter	University of Missouri Law School	http://www.law.missouri.edu/faculty/harterp.html
Sandy Heierbacher	National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation	www.thataway.org
Maggie Herzig	Public Conversations Project	www.publicconversations.org
Matt Leighninger	Deliberative Democracy Coalition	www.deliberative-democracy.net
Michael Lewis	JAMS	www.jamadr.com
Carolyn Lukensmeyer	America Speaks	www.americaspeaks.org
Raphael Montalvo	Florida CR Consortium	Http://consensus.fus.edu
Lucy Moore	Lucy Moore Associates	www.lucy-moore.com
Suzanne Orenstein		
Bill Potapchuk	Community Building Institute	www.communitytools.net
Scott Russell	International Association for Public Participation	www.iap2.org
Susan Sherry	Center for Collaborative Policy	http://www.csus.edu/ccp/
Lawrence Susskind	Public Disputes Program, Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School, and MIT Dept. of Urban Studies and Planning	http://web.mit.edu/publicdisputes/
Elissa Tonkin	U.S. EPA, New England, ADR Program	www.epa.gov/adr www.epa.gov/NE/enforcement/adr