# Sustaining the Success of Collaborative Partnerships:

## Revisiting the *Building Bridges* Cases

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Cover photo is of trees at the San Pedro River in Southeastern Arizona. © Steven L. Yaffee

The Upper San Pedro Program is a collaborative ecosystem management effort between the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the Nature Conservancy, local government, private citizens & landowners to promote the long-term protection of the river system.

In 1994, the results of a research study about successful collaborative partnerships between the USDA-Forest Service and other public and private groups was published in a document entitled, *Building Bridges Across Agency Boundaries: In Search of Excellence in the United States Forest Service.* Out of a list of 230 potential success stories identified by agency and nonagency contacts, 35 situations were chosen as case study sites. These sites were drawn from areas across the United States, including activities ranging from ecosystem management and environmental restoration to rural development and recreation provision. Some involved activities as straight-forward as a nonprofit group providing volunteers to staff a visitor center on National Forest lands. Others were complex, multiparty groups dealing with high levels of conflict and disagreement. All involved efforts in which agency personnel were involved collaboratively with people outside the agency in ways that "bridged" the agency-nonagency boundary. Case vignettes were written that described the situations and analyzed why people

> ## Key Findings:
>
> ✦ Of the cooperative relationships existing in the 35 original Building Bridges cases, 66 percent are still in place three years later and 34 percent have not been sustained.
>
> ✦ Four critical factors seem to account for sustained success: continuity of people and philosophy; agency commitment; having a compelling focus; and putting a mechanism in place that supports continued involvement.
>
> ✦ In some locations, bridging relationships have been maintained even when personnel changed or the original project/tasks ended. These bridges have facilitated other projects and circumvented conflicts. Most important to the continued success of these bridges have been continuity of the collaborative philosophy and people, mechanisms that maintain interaction, and avoiding agency actions that violate a sense of commitment to the efforts.
>
> ✦ These findings suggest administrative responses in order to foster continued success at collaborative agency-nonagency relationships.

perceived them as successful, the factors that facilitated and obstructed success, and key lessons for others involved in bridging.

Three years after the original 35 *Building Bridges* success stories had been documented, key participants were again interviewed by telephone to determine whether or not these successes had been sustained. When viewed over time, were these situations still seen as successful? Had the relationships that were established to carry out the cooperative work been sustained even if the original project tasks had been completed? What distinguished situations that continued to be successful from those that did not survive? What barriers had been encountered since the original set of interviews, and how had these barriers been overcome?

The results of this analysis provide several clear lessons for the Forest Service and other agencies interested in collaborative approaches to resource management. This report describes the findings from these interviews, the factors promoting and impeding sustained success, and the implications for agency involvement in collaborative partnerships in the future.

# Have the Bridges Been Sustained?

The first step in evaluating the status of the original cases was defining how "sustained success" would be measured. In other words, what was it that should be sustained? In answering this question, it was important to differentiate between the project or tasks underway in the original case and the collaborative bridging relationship itself. We were less interested in knowing whether or not the original project still existed and more interested in knowing whether the bridges that enabled these projects to take place were still intact. While specific projects and programs may come and go, we wanted to know whether the relationships, trust, understanding and modes of communication that fostered collaborative work had been maintained. And, moreover, had these bridges been traversed again when other issues or projects arose.

Some of the interview questions gave particular insight into whether or not the bridges have been sustained regardless of the project status. For example, "Do you still interact with the people involved in the project either informally or in the context of other projects?" "Do you think the other parties involved still think it is a success?" "Have there been any other collaborative bridging arrangements that have been sparked by this one?" Answers to these questions indicated the presence or absence of bridges. For example, one respondent described a case in which the bridge was sustained even though the original project had ended. In his words:

> You establish a kind of bond -- a trust bond -- there with the folks that you spend the day with. And you see them again in other instances or sometimes when things are happening and issues come up, and they'll give you a call and say, "what's going on?" Or maybe you want to touch base with a few publics and so you've got that relationship established. You call them and talk about things, so it's just a closer bond and more opportunity to talk directly to the publics.
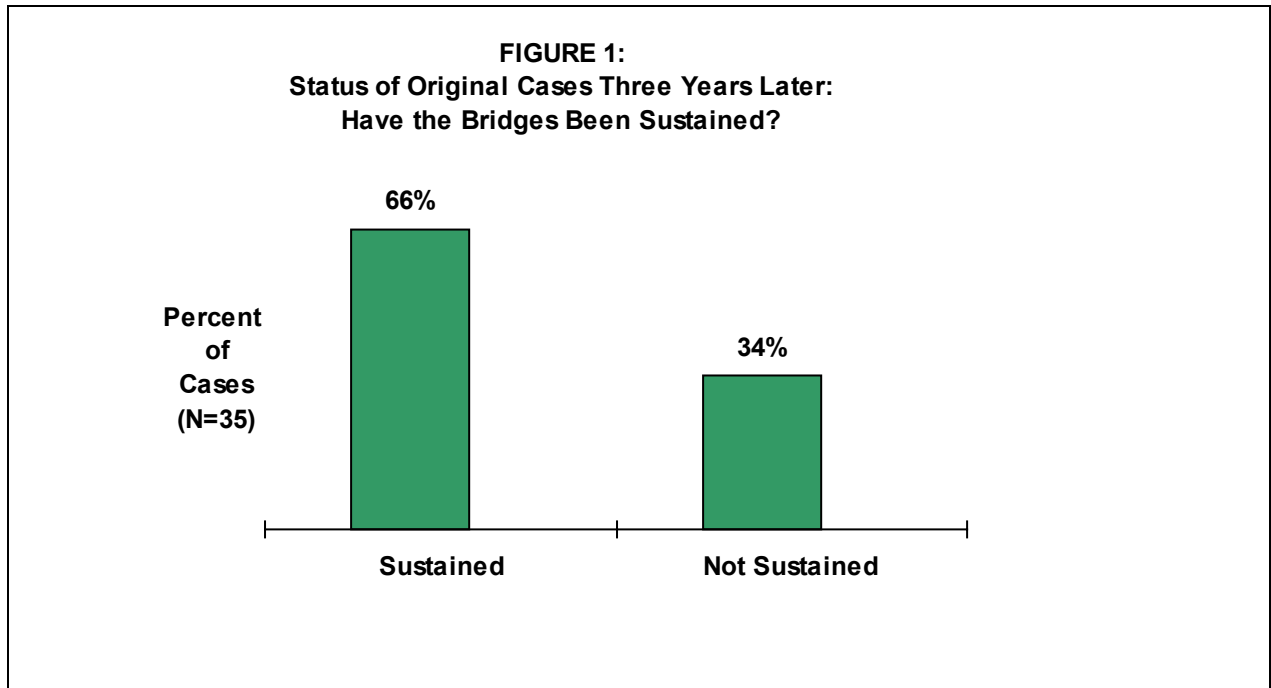
Cases in which we received responses such as the one above were deemed to have sustained bridges, that is, relationships were still in place which allowed dialogue across the agency boundary when needed.

We received contrasting responses in other cases. For example, when asked the question whether or not non-agency participants remained satisfied with the interactions, we received comments such as:

> Ummm...I think so. We haven't had much contact with them in the past couple years. I don't know if they feel if we're listening to them anymore or not...but *internally* we do consider their needs more.

We concluded that the bridges had not been sustained when we received responses of this nature where communication had clearly lapsed.

Of the original 35 success stories, twenty-three (66%) have been sustained and twelve (34%) have not been sustained (Figure 1). All of the cases are dynamic, with forces continuing to promote or challenge them. Some of the sustained cases are beginning to waver and the coming year will reveal whether or not these bridges will survive.

**FIGURE 1:**
**Status of Original Cases Three Years Later:**
**Have the Bridges Been Sustained?**

**Percent of Cases (N=35)**

66% — Sustained
34% — Not Sustained

While clearly there is a relationship between the existence of an effective bridging relationship and a specific project or set of tasks, it does not appear to be unidirectional. More sustained bridges were associated with cases in which projects were still ongoing. In sixteen of 23 cases (70%) where a bridge was sustained, the original projects were still underway (Table 1). At the same time, completion of a project or set of tasks does not mean that the bridging relationship will necessary wither and die. A significant number of cases that had completed the original set of tasks evidenced continuing bridging relationships. Seven of 16 (44 %) of the cases in which the original project tasks ended had maintained successful bridges (Table 1).

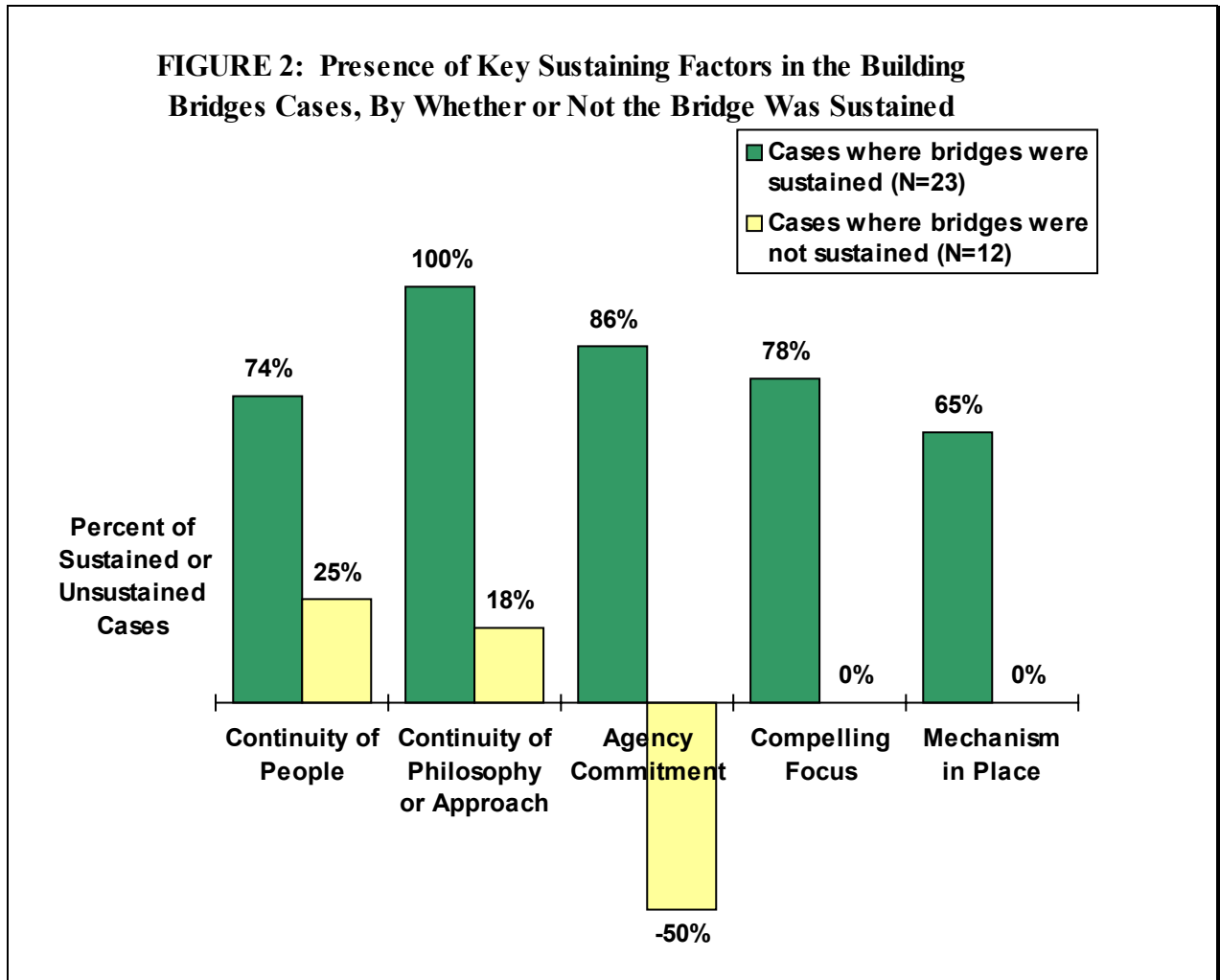**TABLE 1:   Project Status versus Bridge Status:   Was the Bridge Sustained?**

|  |  | Sustained | Not Sustained | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Status of | Ongoing | 16 | 3 | 19 |
| the Original | Completed | 7 | 9 | 16 |
| Project/Tasks | Total | 23 | 12 | 35 |

# Key Factors in Sustaining Success

Why have some cases been more effective at sustaining success over time? A comparison of those situations where bridges were sustained and those where they were not reveals several striking differences and suggest steps that the USFS and other resource management agencies at the state or federal level might take to promote *as well as sustain* collaborative bridges. In particular, four key factors distinguish successful from unsuccessful situations, providing an explanation for why some bridging arrangements continue today while others have crumbled away: *Continuity of People or Philosophy*, *Agency Commitment*, *A Compelling Focus,* and *A Mechanism in Place* that encourages and accommodates interaction (Figure 2). Each of these four factors is discussed below.

**FIGURE 2: Presence of Key Sustaining Factors in the Building Bridges Cases, By Whether or Not the Bridge Was Sustained**

## Factor 1:  Continuity

In those cases where the successes have been sustained and at times enhanced, there was continuity over time.  This continuity usually was provided by stability among agency participants combined with a continuity in their philosophy regarding collaboration.  In some cases, where individuals were transferred, retired, or left the agency for other jobs, continuity was provided by individuals who shared the same philosophy about collaboration and hence were of "like mind."  They understood the importance of bridging and had the ability to sustain the arrangement.  In those cases where the bridges have not been sustained, there has been little continuity among key individuals involved and the philosophy or approach underlying the original relationship has not been continued.

## Continuity of Individuals

The first *Building Bridges* analysis revealed the important role that individuals play in bridging activities.  Quite often it is an individual's energy and dedication that causes bridges to be built.  Their personal commitment assures that the bridges are maintained.  Keeping this individual in place allows their reputation and personal relationships, grounded in trust and respect, to sustain highly productive bridges that can be continually traversed.  As a key individual in one case noted, "the reputation *I* gained in that arena from wildland urban interface planning stood me in good stead when I negotiated with the county planning team for mining mitigation."

These individuals established and maintained these relationships often despite strong resistance in the agency.  As one district ranger commented: "We didn't take no for an answer.  We got 'no's' for a year.  If you want to make things happen...if you got to bend a few rules, take a few risks, that's probably what it will take.  Because when we did this, there were no rules written.  There was nothing that said you could or couldn't do the things we did."  Not surprisingly, once effective interactions were established, individuals like these remained committed to them, ensuring that the bridges would be sustained.  Because these were the individuals who had taken it upon themselves to begin building bridges in the first place because they saw value in doing so, they were the ones who logically perceived a need to maintain them.  So, from those involved in cases where bridges have been sustained, we heard comments like:  "As long as I am here I am going to maintain the good relationship and base level of support that we have;" and "I can't do anything but support the process ... that's just the way I'm made."

The ideal prescription for sustaining bridges is to keep the same key collaborative-minded individual in place.  However, the reality is that, while preferable from the bridging standpoint, keeping people in place is not always preferable or possible from an individual or organizational perspective.  In the normal course of an organization's life, individuals retire, move to new jobs, or

are transferred within the agency or organization. Yet with the departure of key individuals, bridging arrangements are threatened. Of those cases where success has been sustained, 74% had continuity of the key agency individuals involved. In contrast, there was only 25% continuity in the non-sustained cases; only two cases have the same key Forest Service individual involved. In those cases where bridges have not been sustained, the loss of the key individual was most often highlighted as the main contributing factor:

> After [X] left, the project lost steam. [X] was the one that made it happen. He didn't let anything get in his way. The way he had it planned, he carried it out exactly how he wanted it.
>
> [Z]'s leaving had a big impact on the group....I just don't feel that the time, attention, and commitment were there after [Z] left.

In the three years since the original cases were documented, personnel changes have affected 42% of the original 35 cases: four individuals have retired, seven were transferred and four left the agency for other jobs.

## Continuity of Philosophy and Approach

The loss of a key individual does not ensure the demise of a bridge, and can be tempered in a number of ways. While 74% of the sustained cases evidenced continuity of key individuals, the remaining 26% of sustained cases persisted because there was *continuity in philosophy and approach*. In other words, the individuals who retired, left or were transferred, were replaced by like-minded individuals who saw value in the bridging activities and chose to continue in a similar mode.

Several steps were taken to foster this continuity in philosophy and approach. In the sustained cases, key individuals were replaced quickly before relationships began to fade, and were replaced in a manner that promoted continuity. Often there was overlap in the staff members' time on the job, or a team was present into which the replacement stepped and could more easily be acclimated to the new situation. Some key individuals made a point to keep clear files and debriefed their replacement, introducing them to key individuals in the broader community. As a result, in the cases where bridges were sustained, we found 100% continuity in the collaborative philosophy and approach of those involved. Individuals who moved on to other venues were replaced in a variety of ways by like-minded individuals who saw value and need in sustaining the bridges.

In contrast, in the situations where bridges were not sustained, key individuals were often simply not replaced, a consequence of down-sizing in the agency. Even when key staff members were replaced, it was often after a significant lag time, in a less than permanent manner, or with a different set of priorities and direction from above. For example, we heard comments such as:

Between [X]'s leaving and [Y]'s arrival [18 months later], the Forest Service had a technician monitoring the project, but no one was on the ground putting in units or working with other people.

In another case, the Forest Service assigned the project to someone who had not previously been involved with the group. One team member noted:

There was a lot of catch up and getting things back to where they should be. We worked with him to get him up to speed. But after eight months he transferred, and the Forest Service isn't going to replace his position.

In a few cases, continuity was fostered by ensuring that several people from both the agency and other groups were involved, and that communication channels back to constituent groups were established. As a result, the effect of turnover in one or more groups was buffered. Having a cross-section of interests involved in the bridging arrangement can also help sustain the relationship by ensuring that multiple interests are affected by the loss of the bridge. As one participant in a sustained case commented: "Forest Service turnover hasn't been too bad...and the people who have remained with it have made it their business to keep it going."

Regardless of these coping strategies, dealing with the continuity issue can be quite challenging. As one non-agency participant commented:

...there's been musical chairs. The biologists were in temporary positions...the line people have been reduced...It would really be bad if I wasn't available as a consultant to tell them what to do and to brief them on the history of the project and what our goals and things are...If I wasn't here, I think the Forest Service would be in serious jeopardy in getting continuity to the program.

## Factor 2: Agency Commitment

While successful bridging comes from the actions of individuals, the level of commitment that these individuals and their activities receive from the agency directly affects their ability to succeed. In our analysis of the 35 *Building Bridges* cases, agency commitment was the second key factor that promoted successful bridging. Agency-level commitment was apparent in the way that organizational managers and leaders dealt with their staffs, the level of understanding and support given to the collaborative approach used in most bridging arrangements, and the willingness of leaders to evaluate staff and unit effort using measures appropriate to collaborative activities. It was rooted in a recognition of the value inherent in bridging activities. Agency commitment was present in 86% of the cases where bridging was sustained. In contrast, there was no evidence of agency commitment in the non-sustained cases, and in half of these cases, there was clear evidence of a lack of agency commitment.

## Support by Agency Managers and Leaders

One of the most straightforward measures of organizational commitment comes from the responsiveness of agency higher-ups: having the "boss" support the efforts of bridging pioneers and do what they can to help make the bridges work. Their support can take the form of resources such as funding or staffing. For example, the district ranger promoting a collaborative approach in one case sought a special kind of person to lead the effort in order to enhance its potential to succeed: "I wanted a non-traditional person who had an internal passion to do something different." A district ranger participant in another case noted: "Our Forest Supervisor is the same [and] she is *very* supportive." An agency participant in another case commented: "We also have the willingness of our bosses to say, 'Yes, this work is worthwhile and it's valuable'."

Support by agency supervisors also takes the form of providing staff members involved in bridging the flexibility needed to work collaboratively with other groups, and the recognition that the work is valued. As an agency participant in one case commented: "We have been successful because the people in the agencies have the ability and power to decide how much resources they are going to commit to interacting with the Partnership." Even simple things like recognition and praise provide a positive context and impetus to sustain the bridges. One individual exuded enthusiasm and was proud of the positive recognition their effort had received: "It's so politically popular that really there's no question about the partnership itself. They love us. This is a model. People go 'why don't you do this? Look at what they did'."

One measure of the depth of agency commitment to bridging activities that was mentioned by several respondents came in their leaders' response to declining budgets. While shrinking budgets were a frequent lament in almost all cases, how they were dealt with provided an important signal to those interested in collaborative arrangements. For example, in the non-sustained cases several key individuals were simply not replaced or new priorities were imposed: "The money has been reduced every year, and they have been letting people go through attrition. People have full workloads to begin with, but as people leave, we've had to pick up their duties. So there is a lot more piled on top of what is already there." On the other hand, in several of the sustained cases, agency commitment to bridging was demonstrated by finding ways to mitigate the effects of budget cuts: "In a time when budgets were being down-sized [our] budget was not cut. So those actions are walking the talk. They're literally putting their money where their mouth is."

## Commitment to a Collaborative Approach

It is also critical that organizational leaders understand and commit to the use of a collaborative approach to decisionmaking that is needed to ensure the success of bridging activities. Bridging requires modes of decisionmaking and action that are different from the Forest Service's

traditional relationship with national forest constituent groups. For example, rather than simply to seek public *input* to inform a forthcoming decision, the objectives of a collaborative approach are much broader; they are to share information, knowledge, expertise and ideas in order to come to a more complete and *mutual understanding* of a situation and what might be done about it. Rather than acting as the lone expert in search of the one correct answer to a forest management problem, the agency needs to be more of a partner in a process of joint problem-solving. As one agency participant noted, it involves "recognizing that there are different ways of knowing," and acknowledging the legitimacy of the concerns of the other parties involved.

At times a collaborative approach involves a sense of humility and an open-mindedness that have not traditionally been part of the agency's mode of operation. Such an approach also acknowledges that there are different legitimate ways to act, some of which employ the capabilities and resources of nonagency groups. Often, collaboration is not a single point-in-time perspective but rather a choice to do things differently well into the future. Agency leaders must understand and embrace (or at least not obstruct) the concept underlying bridging arrangements if they want them to succeed.

One example of how commitment to the concept of collaboration translates into specific actions lies in the agency's role in a collaborative process. The choice to collaborate -- to pursue a fundamentally different approach to decision-making and management -- requires a level of commitment to the group and its effort that should not be minimized. This means that agency decisionmakers must respect and support the decisions of these groups and commit to implementing them. Obviously the agency remains the party with the statutory responsibility to make choices, and agency officials need to follow legal administrative decisionmaking procedures. But by creating effective collaborative decisionmaking groups and participating in them fully, the choices that result should be technically- and legally-valid, while encouraging ownership by nonagency parties. One of the worst outcomes is for the agency to initiate collaborative arrangements, and then fail to implement their agreed-upon solutions. Commitment includes not just initiating bridging arrangements, but supporting actions that result from them.

Mixing collaborative interactions with unilateral decisions also can be problematic. In at least two cases, several non-agency members felt slighted when the agency failed to consult with them on activities that directly affected their project area. As the Forest Service representative involved in one case noted, "A couple of things happened ... and some members of the group felt that we had decided to go off on our own and do what we were going to do anyway. There has been a little bit of tension." Participating with "one foot in the door and one foot outside" gives the appearance of a lack of good faith that strains the bridges. In contrast, in the sustained cases the Forest Service participated as an equal partner with the others around the table.

In one case, participants commented on the benefit of "having an independent party to run the process." As the Forest Service participant noted,

> It's useful to have one person coordinating it more or less from end to end. It seems to be helpful to have it be someone outside of the Forest Service, because that allows the Forest Service to sit around the table as participants and avoid creating the impression that they're kind of running the railroad and it will go where they lay the tracks.

The independent facilitator involved commented that this approach gave the agency participants the opportunity "to roll up their sleeves [and] be in the same boat" as the other participants.

## Adapting Agency Procedures to Support Bridging Activities

A final component of agency commitment lies in the efforts of the agency to adapt agency rules and procedures so that collaborative bridging activities can proceed. At times, this means being flexible about personnel procedures such as working hours and accounting practices that impose red tape and constrain even small yet meaningful things like purchasing coffee and donuts for meetings. A number of staff members involved in successful bridges noted the need to "throw away the rulebook" and focus on getting the job done. That they were allowed to do so suggested the depth of their supervisors' commitment to the efforts.

Agency commitment can also mean changing the measures used to evaluate the success and effectiveness of these endeavors. In those situations where agency officials recognized the need to employ new standards for guiding and judging the collaborative approach, bridges are strong and thriving. In those situations, however, where old standards for review and evaluation are being applied to the new endeavors, the bridges have been threatened. For example, an agency participant in one case commented about the tensions in his forest:

> A lot of our obstacles have been internal.
>
> We at the District feel that what we have accomplished has been a success. Rather than going through the traditional process and fighting the appeals, we have something up front that everybody agrees with and everybody thinks should be done...We have a better working relationship with a lot of people in the community which is very important.
>
> [But] the Forest Supervisor's office thinks that we should have accomplished more than we have. The project has taken too much time, and they haven't seen the products that they wanted to see. They think that we spent too much time dealing with internal issues among the group -- what should be done, what shouldn't be done.

This individual expressed frustration at the growing inconsistencies between what the agency asked of the group at the beginning and what was expected of them at the end. At the outset, he commented, there was strong support at the forest level and above because "it was a pretty thing. It was a pilot project, and the Forest Service was going to try something different." As time went on,

however, this support languished, eventually turning to criticism as traditional outcome measures were imposed on the group:

> A lot of what we were supposed to be doing was consensus-based management, and we don't have that option to be consensus-based if we have specific outcomes that we have to adhere to based on the money that we are getting.

> They give us a certain amount of money, but they don't want to know that we had a nice friendly group discussion and that we are going to go off and do this and that. They want to know what date you are going to have a completed NEPA document in hand because that is the end product that they are looking for even though the idea was to get away from that with ecosystem management.

## Factor 3: A Compelling Focus

The third key factor that distinguished between those cases that were sustained and those that were not was the presence of a compelling focus to the interaction: a focus on a special place, a common vision of the future or a shared problem. Visible progress -- having things happen -- also compelled continued success. These interactions were framed in a manner that looked beyond narrow, individual interests to larger, shared concerns that could only be addressed through concerted and combined efforts. Such a focus motivated involved groups to sustain their efforts. 78% of the sustained cases evidenced a compelling focus, while none of the non-sustained cases had framed their interactions in a way that kept their efforts compelling. For example, from the sustained cases we heard comments such as, "Busy people are devoting their time to this because it's something they love."

At times, a strong sense of place provided the focal point for sustained success. For example, one agency participant noted:

> The group of individuals has a common and deep commitment to place and community. If you start a partnership based on ideals and you don't have a place, it would be really hard.

The agency participant in another case commented:

> [It] is so special, people feel such passion for it. It's not very difficult to get them to continue to come to meetings, they just love the place -- we're really at an advantage.

The importance of a shared vision was highlighted in several cases. In one case, a participant noted, "One thing that has brought us together is our vision of the unique area we live in." Another respondent commented:

> A shared vision has to guide the partnership. Articulating the vision has been very, very important for us. We wrote it down in the beginning and it has really been a guiding light when things got squirrelly the last couple of years.

One agency participant commented on the motivation instilled by a strong sense of a shared place combined with an overriding need to collaborate:

> We're an extremely isolated community...and we're tied together by one two lane highway. Because of this isolation, people *have* to work together, even though there are competing interests.

While many people were compelled to interact because of a shared place, problem or vision, an additional factor that sustained bridges was the realization that progress was possible. Something had happened which motivated those involved. As one agency individual noted: "We're more project-oriented, as opposed to sitting around discussing. People like that, like to see things happen." Another commented: "The support is continual and really pretty overwhelming. But I have to say it's because we're showing results up there." And yet another commented: "You have to see some forward progress. You can plan and scheme, but what keeps people's interest is seeing some progress on the ground. So you have to build this in some way." Another concluded: "We've never gone out and been very successful in saying out of the blue 'let's collaborate' with cooperators. I think our success has come from the fact that we've been able to show success -- provided leadership, and others are willing to come along. A workman's approach." Part of giving the effort a compelling focus was making it worthwhile; not only was there a *need* to interact but, moreover, those involved could actually *do something*. Visible on-the-ground progress helped sustain the interaction.

## Factor 4:  A Mechanism in Place

The final key factor in sustaining successful bridges is the presence of a mechanism or structure that maintains predictable and meaningful communication between agency and non-agency groups. 65% of cases where success has been sustained had a structure in place that maintained ready communication; none of the non-sustained cases had evidence of such structures. A range of different strategies were used in the sustained cases to maintain the bridges, from simple, informal newsletters to formal memoranda of understanding. In some cases, regular scheduled meetings or activities provided the context within which dialogue was maintained. In other cases, joint research or management activities regularized the interaction. In one case, Forest Service staff capitalized on pre-existing venues to maintain their relationship with the non-agency groups: "We attend all of their board meetings, special events, training sessions, and awards banquet."

Bridges also were sustained when a designated "point person" coordinated management activities and communication between partners. As one coordinator noted, "It works okay because *everything* goes through me." The presence of someone who was "in charge" readily facilitated

ongoing interaction.  People within and outside the agency knew who to call and, in turn, the coordinator shouldered the responsibility for ensuring continued communication.

Formal structures that outline the responsibilities of members of a collaborative effort also facilitated progress in a number of cases.  For example, in one case, a clearly-defined Memorandum of Understanding facilitated strong and sustained bridges.  According to one participant:

> The MOU gave us the framework to work together across agency boundaries. [It] defines the roles of different groups and individuals that are involved, and how communication and coordination will flow.  I've been in this job for six years and having the MOU is the difference between night and day in the way we are operating.

In all these cases, having a means for regular contact and communication was important to continued involvement and success.  For example, one of our favorite quotes gathered during the research came from a district planner who understood the importance of maintaining inclusive, regular and predictable communication:

> One of the things we have done at each meeting is confirm the date of the next meeting and tentatively set the date of the meeting after that.  We always have it at the same time, between six and eight, and that time was chosen by the core team.  One thing I made sure to do was start on time, even if everybody wasn't there, and we ended on time, even if ten people stayed and talked for the next 45 minutes.  And I think people really appreciate that, because they know that at 8:00 they can get in their cars and go if they want to.  I say if they want pizza they should call me by 5:00 PM the day before.  Very few people do that and what I end up doing is try and call everybody who has been to a core team meeting sometime before and say "Do you want pizza?"  It serves as a reminder.  There are a lot of people I know that have never had pizza, they're never *going* to have pizza, but they get a call anyway.
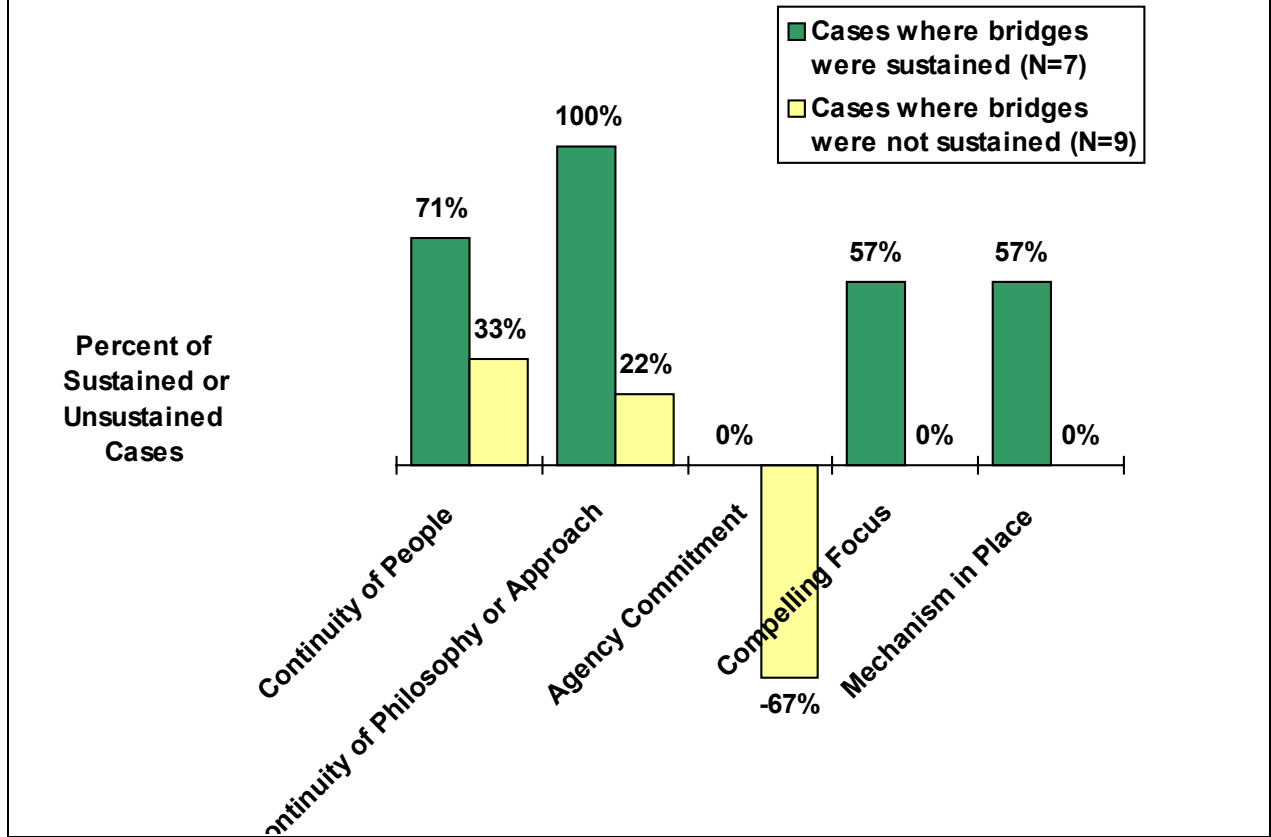
Of course, regular meetings that have no purpose are a surefire way to frustrate and alienate potential partners.  Any meeting must be centered around a compelling set of tasks to accomplish or issues to discuss.  But, without a structure or mechanism in place that encourages regular communication and maintains relationships, bridges start to erode.  In cases where bridges have *not* been sustained, the individuals involved noted that "the agreed upon meetings just never were held" or ongoing communication with non-agency groups "fell through the cracks." One individual commented: "I don't know where the group stands now...we didn't have meetings on a regular basis."

# Why Have Some Bridges Survived the Completion/End of the Original Project Tasks?

The importance of these key factors is reiterated by an analysis of cases in which projects were completed yet bridges remained. The most likely place for a bridge to begin weakening is at the end of a specific project around which a group had formed. It takes extra effort to keep a bridge in place as the initial impetus for its construction fades away. Yet of sixteen cases in which the original project tasks ended, seven were able to sustain the bridging relationship. What accounts for the continued success of these efforts in what might be viewed as a "worst case" situation?

As can be seen in Figure 3, several key factors seemed to account for the continued success of the bridging relationship in these cases. First and foremost is the continuation of the collaborative philosophy, generally provided by continuity in staffing. In five of seven cases (71%), the lead Forest Service staff member who had been involved in the original project was still in place, and for those locations where the original staffer had left, they had been replaced by someone of like mind. In contrast, two-thirds of the cases in which bridges had not been sustained lost key staff members and in only two of the nine cases was a staff member present who supported the collaborative concepts underlying bridging.

**FIGURE 3: Presence of Key Sustaining Factors in the 16 Cases in which the Original Projects Ended**

Percent of Sustained or Unsustained Cases

Legend:
- ■ Cases where bridges were sustained (N=7)
- ■ Cases where bridges were not sustained (N=9)

Data by category:
- Continuity of People: 71%, 33%
- Continuity of Philosophy or Approach: 100%, 22%
- Agency Commitment: 0%, -67%
- Compelling Focus: 57%, 0%
- Mechanism in Place: 57%, 0%

A second factor accounting for sustained success after a project's completion was the existence of a structure that fostered communication among the original participants. Four of seven locations (57%) with sustained bridges used mechanisms for interaction developed during the original projects. These included ongoing citizen advisory councils that were place- not project-based, as well as councils of local and county government officials devoted to a specific category of activity, such as community development.

Third, it is clear that sustained success at bridging can be damaged by agency actions that actively oppose the products or process of collaboration. Two-thirds of the cases in which a bridge was not maintained evidenced action by agency leaders or managers that was perceived to be in bad faith by the non-agency participants in the collaborative effort. These actions included unilateral agency decisions that undermined or strained group decisions, failure to follow through with agreed-upon tasks, failure to replace key individuals, and withdrawing resources needed to continue the group's efforts. At the same time, few of the sites that saw sustained success demonstrated active commitment on the part of agency leaders. It appears that once commitment was expressed in the

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early phases of the relationship, the bridging arrangement could continue despite the lack of active agency support, as long as agency leaders did not do things that damaged the relationship.

Finally, a sense of place provided a compelling focus for four of the seven (57%) sites that sustained bridges despite completion of the original project. These cases included national forests with a particular natural feature, such as a wilderness area, that attracted organized and sustained citizen interest. This commitment to the place was more fundamental to the effort than were the specific projects.

# Implications for Agency Involvement
# in Collaborative Processes

There are many things that the Forest Service can do to foster healthy and sustained bridging arrangements. If agency leaders are sincere about pursuing a "collaborative stewardship" vision, they need to provide the flexibility, resources and support that will help individuals at all levels of the agency act on this vision. Agency officials must recognize that collaborative processes are not a separate activity but rather an approach to national forest management that is integral to many programmatic areas. Collaboration is part of a way of thinking about national forest management, not an isolated activity that can be defined as public involvement. Once built, bridges can be traversed not once and in a single context but many times. While building a bridge can cost a considerable amount of up-front time and energy, these short-term costs are justified when the long-term benefits of collaborative problem-solving and joint action are realized across the spectrum of national forest management activity.

## Maintaining Continuity

Given the importance of continuity of people and philosophy demonstrated by the *Building Bridges* cases that have sustained success, agency leaders need to find ways to mitigate the effects of personnel turnover. Bridges are sustained through relationships between individuals, and they are damaged when key individuals leave the area. To the extent possible, people should be left in place to avoid severing these relationships. This approach might mean finding ways to provide greater opportunities for individuals to develop their careers in one area, so that career growth does not imply transfers across great distances. At minimum, agency leaders should understand the cost of breaking ties with nonagency groups implied when transferring an individual or reassigning them to other work, and should include these opportunity costs in personnel decisions.

At the same time, it is important to understand and plan for changes in the workforce, as the natural ebb and flow of individuals in the agency occurs. If an individual who is central to a collaborative set of relationships bridging the agency/non-agency boundary is transferred or retires, they need to be replaced quickly. New staff members need to be educated about the nature of the bridging relationship and projects and introduced to partners. An explicit transfer of responsibilities should occur so that the new staff member understands the nature of a relationship that may be more idiosyncratic than internal agency relationships. Having new staff come on board while the old staff members are still in place can help to ease these transitions, and allow new relationships to be crafted in a way that builds trust in the new staff members. Agency leaders need to understand that nonagency partners take staffing decisions -- whether someone is appointed and what kind of

person is chosen -- as signals of agency intent.  An effective transfer of functions can help reassure partners that the agency is still committed to the collaborative efforts.

Other approaches can be used to maintain an institutional memory so that bridges can be sustained.  Having multiple staff members involved in a bridging relationship can provide some redundancy in the face of personnel turnover.  Institutionalizing the collaborative arrangement through memorandums of understanding or similar structures can help create an organizational life for the bridge that exists beyond the people-to-people ties.  Since they often define specific responsibilities allocated by institution, such structures also can foster a framework for accountability that encourages continued effort.

## Ensuring Commitment

Agency commitment requires sincerity about the interaction and follow-through on collaborative decisions.  It entails respect for both the individuals involved in the collaborative effort, and the integrity and purpose of the collaborative effort itself.  In a single phrase, it involves "walking the talk."  It is not enough to say that you are in favor of collaborative approaches or to provide formal agency pronouncements to that effect.  Nor is it enough to simply start initiatives.  Middle managers and agency leaders need to support the efforts by committing the resources that are needed to succeed, and rewarding those who work hard at crafting such relationships.  And they need to support the decisions of such groups and implement them in good faith.  If conditions change, agency decisionmakers should use the bridging relationships to explain why a collaborative decision needs to be updated and work collectively towards that end.  Collaborative arrangements create expectations and costs for nonagency groups, and Forest Service leaders need to honor the obligations they create by entering into these relationships.  To do otherwise, in many situations, is to make a bad situation worse.

In order to foster this sense of commitment, it is important to build a clearer understanding of collaborative arrangements on the part of line officers and other supervisory personnel.  Training needs to emphasize why collaboration is important to effective long term management and what is needed from the agency to make it work.  Having case studies of successful collaborative arrangements, and testimonials from people who have participated in them, can help create positive imagery.  Using bridging pioneers -- individuals who have worked collaboratively in a successful manner -- as short-term circuit riders to explain their methods to their peers is another approach to conveying understanding across the agency.  It is important to confront the fears of some agency staff when they think about engaging in collaborative activity:  a concern about losing control, a sense of unease about the appropriate agency role in such endeavors, and questions about how collaboration fits into statutory obligations.  Agency norms that emphasize control and top-down

decisionmaking need to be tempered to facilitate joint problem-solving and collaborative decisionmaking.

Agency managers need to provide bridging staff with the flexibility and resources needed to get the job done. Some agency procedures get in the way of effective collaborative relationships and these need to be evaluated for their effectiveness in today's management situation. Few of these relationships demand large amounts of funding or staffing, and it is important that resources be committed to sustain the relationships. In some of the cases where success was not sustained, resources were cut because the activities were seen as marginal to the core missions of the agency. The choice here is clear: either commit necessary resources to foster collaborative work or do not embrace collaboration as a mode of operation.

New approaches to evaluating progress and measuring the success of collaborative efforts are needed. It is critical not to apply old standards of review and evaluation to new endeavors. Agreement is needed before a collaboration gets underway that defines how the effort will be evaluated, and this up-front agreement is one way to build understanding and commitment to what is being done. At times it is more important that the bridges be maintained, rather than specific work tasks get accomplished. The notion that process may be as important as measurable outcomes is not entirely comfortable to many Forest Service leaders, who came of age in a time when timber volumes provided clear and tangible measures of success. But building and maintaining a diverse set of relationships with outside groups is equally important today so that the agency understands public values and needs, can access the resources prevalent in the broader society, and can make and implement wise choices. Finding ways to evaluate progress at these tasks is important in an agency fond of specific targets and evaluation criteria.

## Building a Compelling Focus

Having a strong sense of place, shared problem, or common vision was important to sustaining success at bridging, and there are ways to build on this understanding. Helping agency staff understand what motivates other people can assist them in designing activities that will build effective collaborative relationships. Effective process management can help diverse groups focus on shared problems, so that a common vision can be articulated that will help motivate sustained effort. Small scale projects can be used to develop a common ground to build shared images, and small successes can be used to motivate larger ones. Progress is motivating. Hence, enabling nonagency participants to see the results of their efforts can provide impetus to continued work.

It is also important for agency officials to recognize the efforts of partners. Publicly acknowledging the value of their work by providing statements to local media, issuing certificates of appreciation, and other approaches can help foster a sense of the group. Having the collaborative

arrangement held up as a model of success elsewhere in the country also helps to create an affirmative sense of the group. Documenting and publicizing these efforts can help encourage a group identity and a sense of pride that can help sustain the efforts.

## Using Mechanisms to Maintain the Bridging Relationship

Since some cases sustained success by creating interesting mechanisms to hold the effort together, it is important that agency staff have a clear understanding of the range of such mechanisms and when they are appropriate. Training programs or guides can help to outline the range of mechanisms available and deal with any administrative or legal concerns associated with specific mechanisms. It is important that agency staff understand both informal mechanisms, such as using existing social networks and venues, and formal mechanisms, such as memorandums of understanding, cooperative agreements, etc. A rich set of examples of how these mechanisms have been used in other national forest situations can help staff members imagine their use in their problem setting.

## Understanding the Importance of Bridging

All of these ideas rely on an enhanced understanding of the significance of bridging to the future of national forest management. As we have described elsewhere,[1] building bridges between the agency and other groups has multiple benefits and these need to be understood by individuals throughout the agency hierarchy. Training, imagery provided by documented successes, the diffusion of ideas through personnel networks and conferences, a culture of experimentation that allows staff members to try out collaborative activities, policy statements that support collaborative stewardship, and a commitment to support collaborative efforts and implement their decisions in an honest, good faith manner can help build this understanding and capability.

It is also important that agency leaders and staff understand the difference between bridging relationships and the specific projects that groups can undertake. A network of relationships is often a legitimate objective so that problems are identified, values are expressed, trust is developed, and working arrangements are forged that allow the management of national forest resources to proceed more effectively and with less conflict than has been true in the recent past. At the same time, some bridges are destined to fade, as the original need subsides or project is completed. There is no magic formula here; just the need to foster connections between the agency and the world around it. Fortunately, one of the underlying messages that comes from the 23 *Building Bridges* cases

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[1]See, for example, Steven L. Yaffee and Julia M. Wondolleck, "Building Bridges Across Agency Boundaries," in Creating a Forestry for the 21st Century: The Science of Ecosystem Management edited by Kathryn Kohm and Jerry Franklin (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1996), pp. 381-396.

that are still seen as successful is that it is possible to go beyond building bridges to sustaining effective collaborative relationships over time.