

CHAPTER 19: ACCOMMODATING DIVERSE CAPABILITIES

I. INTRODUCTION

Overview

The diverse perspectives, insights, skills, energy, creativity and influence that participants bring to the table comprise the basis of a collaborative partnership's ability to solve problems. At the same time, this diverse amalgam of capabilities can create challenges for the group. In reality these differences are not unique to collaborative groups, but hold true for the public policy arena in general. As Ken Mauer of the Scott River CRMP commented, "Unequal power is a problem of the world in general, and what we have in our CRMP is just a little slice of the same thing." Similarly, Allen Kramer of the same group noted, "[Diverse capabilities] are not just an Achilles' heel of collaboration, it's an Achilles' heel of the world." The partnerships we studied recognized the challenge of accommodating diverse capabilities, and dealt with it in a variety of ways in order to enhance their communication and problem-solving abilities.

Summary of Core Findings

Core Issues and Strategies

1. Balancing influence in the process

Partnerships grappled with how to temper the influence of traditionally high power interests so that all were better able to contribute to the process and voice their concerns in an equitable way.

Strategies

- Retained autonomy to act outside the group
- Increased diversity at the table
- Used a consensus decision-making rule
- Hired a lawyer to represent less powerful interests

2. Managing different communication styles and abilities

Partnerships dealt with how to organize themselves so that no single interest or individual dominated the process.

Strategies

- Built trust through opportunities for social interaction
- Hired a facilitator / provided internal facilitation
- Practiced one-on-one interventions

3. Building capacity for equitable participation

Partnerships struggled with how to organize themselves so that everyone is on the same page at the same time and everyone has the ability (or at least the opportunity) to articulate their concerns.

Strategies

- Made meetings accessible in terms of timing and location
- Provided orientation and training
- Broke down the larger group into working groups

Advice and Reflections

- Improve communication
- Practice constructive behavior
- Provide training
- Think about individuals as well as interests
- Utilize leadership
- Build trust
- Other insights

II. SPECIFIC CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

Balancing Influence in the Process

Collaborative partnerships by nature bring together diverse interests with differing abilities to exert influence either inside or outside the process. The variance in levels of influence reflects the way U.S. society is organized, and is therefore a reality of most decision-making arenas. The groups we interviewed recognized the need to temper the influence of traditionally high power interests so that all were better able to contribute to the process and voice their concerns in an equitable way.

The majority of the people we interviewed felt that, although varying levels of power were apparent in their groups, more powerful interests did not dominate the process. In fact, some groups mentioned that having powerful interests at the table was an advantage for the partnership. In the case of the McKenzie Watershed Council, most of the members are high-power individuals who have great influence in their own organizations and the community. By including those people on the council, members conclude that recommendations made by the council are more likely to be implemented.

Defining roles and authority

A few groups confronted power struggles resulting from a desire to retain a status quo authority over the decision-making process. In the Scott River CRMP, agencies were observed attempting to control the process. Sari Sommarstrom, former coordinator of Scott River described what happened with the local Resource Conservation District (RCD), a

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champion of farming interests: “At the beginning, it seems the RCD thought the consensus process was just another name for majority rule. Because they already had the trust of the landowners, they attempted to load the CRMP by putting multiple representatives of the agriculture interest groups on board. In other words, they wanted to make sure that, no matter what, they had a majority.” Some participants expressed a fear that agencies would “run away with the process” by controlling access to technical information (Marx, 1999).

In the Three-Quarter Circle Ranch CRM, landowner Tony Malmberg speaks to the same desire to maintain authority. The CRM process he initiated to collaboratively manage his ranching operation in Wyoming reserves a status quo mechanism that provides the necessary incentive for landowners to try alternative management methods: “We operate on a consensus basis but with a quasi-veto power for landowners. In other words, if I don’t like the decisions that will affect my lands, I am not going to do it.” When compared to the alternative of private ranching decisions that do not incorporate the perspectives of other stakeholders, this was seen as a necessary mechanism.

Often the issues surrounding jurisdictions and influence result from ambiguous decision-making roles. Verl Brown of Owl Mountain Partnership described this tension: “Everyone wants power... the power struggle between people and agencies...that is a real drawback on getting things done. Right now were talking about getting more into the area of issues rather than projects and it is going to be tough because agencies do not like to give up their authority.”

Mitigating the influence of dominant interests

In the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance and Clark County HCP, dominant interests attempted to use their influence to force agendas through the collaborative process. In the Nanticoke, for example, environmentalist and former University professor Charlie Cipolla believes that, “The interests that have come to the table and who have really set the agenda have been the large economic interests. The timber people made darn sure that they got in there and defined the situation.” He described a situation where the NWA, upon learning of a member timber company’s violation of a buffer zone along the river corridor, reported the incident to the local authorities. The industry was furious and according to Cipolla, “There were some not so thinly veiled threats leveled that if that were ever to happen again, the person involved might find himself at great risk.”

In Clark County, representatives of multiple-use interests like miners and off-road vehicle enthusiasts felt at a disadvantage because of their lack of resources and knowledge of the issues. They believed that both developers and scientists have attempted to use money and information to shift the process in their favor. Ann Schrieber, a local miner in Clark County recalled, “they told me at the first meeting to shut up because I was not putting up the money.”

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Strategies

While the reality of different levels of influence cannot be eliminated, partnerships did employ a variety of strategies to temper the influence of traditionally high power interests so that all interests were better able to contribute to the process and voice their concerns in an equitable way. The partnerships we interviewed mentioned the following strategies. They:

- Used a consensus decision-making rule
- Increased diversity at the table
- Retained autonomy to act outside the group

One of the primary strategies used by the majority of our cases was a consensus decision-making rule. On the McKenzie Watershed Council, consensus was seen as a way to give “people from those potentially less powerful groups a voice with these bigger groups” (Fox, 1999). In the words of McKenzie Watershed Council coordinator John Runyon: “The final sort of equalizer is our consensus process. One individual has the power to block anything moving forward even if that individual doesn’t have big institutions behind him. Everyone around the table is aware of that and that’s a big equalizer.”

In the Clark County case, rural interests felt shut out of a process that required intense time investments, familiarity with science, and negotiation savvy. In order to provide those interests with an opportunity to successfully negotiate with more powerful participants, the HCP group hired a lawyer to represent them. In the words of off-road vehicle user Mark Trinko: “Karen Budd-Fallon’s role as a legal representative of rural interests and the grazing community has been essential. I’m not sure we could have done it without her.... She served an invaluable liaison role.”

A third strategy employed by the Darby Partnership, Nanticoke Watershed Alliance, and McKenzie Watershed Council, was to create an information-sharing atmosphere where each individual retains his / her own independent decision-making authority. Partnerships that structured themselves as primarily information-sharing or coordinating bodies retained decision-making autonomy for their members. Lisa Jo Frech, director of the Nanticoke, explained: “Let’s say...we decide we are not going to fight a particular issue. That does not mean that one of our member groups can’t go out and fight. They still have autonomy.” This autonomy, while it can compromise the partnership’s integrity, exists for all participants. Of hundreds of collaborative groups reviewed for this study, none had regulatory authority. Participants, regardless of their influence in the group, always have the option to pursue other paths to meet their goals.

Managing different communication styles and abilities

In all of the partnerships, individual personalities were raised as an issue groups had to be aware of and work with. As in the outside world, the participants in collaborative groups bring with them vastly different communication styles and abilities. Much of the ability to work productively with others depends on personality. Some groups struggled with how to

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deal with one individual with a strong personality who tended to dominate the process, limiting opportunities for more reticent individuals to participate, or toppling the group's fragile trust. Although stronger personalities often made it difficult to manage the process fairly, groups employed a variety of strategies to curb the dominance of any single individual or interest

In the Scott River CRMP, environmentalist Felice Pace's "irascible personality" has caused members to drop out: "He broke the rules many times but people were afraid because of his ability to get the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund and others with big money to sue landowners. Frankly I don't think the group will ever have trust as long as he's involved. That doesn't mean his interests can't be represented. It's the personality that represents those interests that's the problem" (Roehrich, 1999). Dick Loper of the Three-Quarter Circle Ranch CRM comments that strong personalities are "an exploitation of a custom and culture" because "ranchers in the West don't have the professional skills and negotiation training that you find among professionals."

On the other hand, interviewees stressed that the group dynamic itself is often adequate to curb extreme voices and to ensure that all voices are heard. Greg Sherman of Owl Mountain Partnership describes this process: "You have some people who are louder, more aggressive than others. It could theoretically control where the group is going. What really happens though is it puts a lot of weight on the private landowner's side. They are typically very quiet about it, but when they do say something about it, everybody listens...and the ones that yap most kind of get shut off."

Speaking about a strong personality on the NW Colorado RAC, Cathie Zarlingo adds, "I think they understand that if they try to overwhelm it, that would torpedo the process and we could be back where we were before, with nothing."

Strategies

In order to manage diverse communication styles and capabilities, groups employed several strategies. A subtle way of dealing with diverse personalities was to ensure diversity at the table. In the words of Tony Malmberg of the Three-Quarter Circle Ranch CRM, "I guess I see diversity at the table as an insulator against being controlled by one group or interest." The group, by the strength of its coalition of diverse individuals, often outweighed a particular individual.

In the Scott River CRMP, the group had to hire a facilitator for a period of two years in order to manage contentious meetings productively. Groups without neutral facilitation, like the Three-Quarter Circle Ranch CRM, stressed the importance of using a group leader or chairperson to bring out and define the interests of group members.

Also, in the McKenzie Watershed Council, although interviewees mentioned the "stronger voices" on the council, they felt the group dynamic tempered what might have been more dominating interactions. One-on-one interactions also helped integrate those people into the

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process. As Pat Thompson, a resident and landowner, recalled, “We’re fortunate to have a group of people who know when to call bologna. There’s not a single person in this group who’s going to be bullied...we’ve had some very very strong personalities who try to guide the process. (After) two or three meetings, they realize if there’s ever going to be a decision made I’m going to have to give as well. And there’s not a person on this group who isn’t willing to pull that individual aside and talk turkey with them and say look, you’re not getting anywhere with this” (Thompson).

Building capacity for equitable participation

Given the reality that participants come to collaborative processes with differing levels of knowledge, skills and resources, partnerships grappled with how to facilitate meaningful and productive participation for everyone involved. Specifically, groups faced the challenge of organizing themselves so that everyone is on the same page at the same time and everyone has the ability (or at least the opportunity) to articulate their concerns.

The issue of knowledge and skills was a concern to several of the participants that we interviewed. In the Clark County HCP, Jim Moore remarked that “User groups simply felt they didn’t have the legal or scientific skills to fight the battle on even ground.” In fact, Sid Sloane from the same group described the “constant fear from outlying communities that they’d get blind sided by something they didn’t understand.” Outside observer Doug Heiken of the Oregon Natural Resources Council, commenting on the “meek” environmental representation on the McKenzie Watershed Council, said, “It’s hard to stand up and disagree with your peers when you don’t have totally solid information.”

Judith Stribling, a professor at Salisbury State College and member of the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance, described the effect that unequal knowledge base can have on group process: “There have been situations where the group will have a sense that there is a consensus when there are people there who do not really agree and find it difficult to express that because they are feeling somewhat overwhelmed.” Tony Cheng, a doctoral student who has closely observed interactions on the McKenzie Watershed Council, describes a similar situation of “dialogue where some people have more knowledge than others make categorical comments and everybody takes them as truth.”

Disparate levels of resources were another reality that hampered equitable participation. In Clark County, this was especially evident because of the long meetings and driving distances required for participation. Private citizens often had to forfeit a day’s wages to attend meetings. Jim Moore stated, “The resources, skills and access to the process was an issue from day one. Especially with smaller land users and mom and pop miners. They felt that their livelihoods were on the line, yet they were not getting paid by anybody to participate, whereas the agency folks and others like me were all getting salaries to engage in this process.”

Strategies

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Groups dealt with these issues by implementing concrete changes to group process or organizational structure. Specifically, they:

- ◆ Made meetings accessible in terms of timing and location
- ◆ Provided orientation and training
- ◆ Created working groups

Both in the beginning stages and throughout the collaborative process, orientation and training was considered an essential strategy to keep everybody on the same page and facilitate equitable participation. The NW Colorado RAC, for example, provided a pre-RAC weekend training workshop on both substantive issues and process. The workshop, described as “imperative to working in these types of groups” (Zarlingo, RAC), was recently repeated as new members joined the group. The McKenzie Watershed Council also provides orientation for new members, in addition to on-going educational presentations to the group as a whole. John Runyon explained: “We’re very careful up front in providing very thorough orientation to everybody who comes in on how the council works and let them know that there are resources available if they don’t have them personally.”

Altering the timing and location of meetings was important to providing adequate opportunity for everyone to participate. When the McKenzie Council hired John Runyon as coordinator two years ago, the meeting structure was one of the first things he changed. He recalled: “When I came on board that was one of the first things I tried to do, change the structure to streamline the meetings, because they would often go on into the wee hours of the morning. They would last for six hours... Start at 5 and run until 12.” Now most meetings last about three hours. Runyon explained, “The way we did that was to transfer a lot of council business and a lot of the up front framing of the issues to the executive committee. So we have an executive committee that meets once a month before the council meeting, sets the agenda, and frames the issues, actually makes recommendations on what the council should act upon.” The location of meetings was also important, to facilitate access for rural residents. Although most council meetings are held in Eugene, the closest town for most members, sometimes meetings are held in different locations throughout the watershed. According to Runyon, “When we have a meeting where we think there’s something of interest to watershed residents, we try to move up river, especially in the summer.”

Organizational structure was also altered to create more opportunities for participation. In the Darby Partnership, meetings were often very large and dealt with a wide range of issues. Participants without expertise in a particular issue were not able to contribute or engage in the process. The creation of teams to deal with separate issues, like soil erosion or urban sprawl, helped to focus participants in a comfortable setting where their knowledge and skills were most useful.

Interviewees saw building trust among participants as a way to make the most of the diverse capabilities at the table, while minimizing any drawbacks. In the words of Walid Bou-Matar of the NW Colorado RAC, “We don’t expect one guy who knows oil and gas, to know

everything about ranching, farming and the environment. There is room to listen and build trust to know that someone is not giving you a snow job.”

III. ADVICE AND REFLECTIONS

When asked what they might have done differently in hindsight, or what advice they might offer others now undertaking collaborative initiatives, participants offered a wealth of advice and reflections on how to temper the influence of traditionally high power interests so that all are better able to contribute to the process and voice their concerns in an equitable way. Steve Corbitt of the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance provided a guide: “Take it slow. Be respectful. Encourage people to speak up. Don’t be judgmental. Put a positive spin on everything that is said and try to see everything in the best light as possible. Keep hammering away on making progress. Get to know each other. Do meetings in different places once in a while. Share a pizza.”

The advice of other participants fell generally in the following categories:

- Improve communication
- Practice constructive behavior
- Provide training
- Think about individuals as well as interests
- Utilize leadership
- Build trust
- Other

Improve communication

- “Before you even form, before you have the board sitting down together, you need to have a process where you listen to all of the stakeholders in the watershed and actively listen to residents and actively try to pull them into the process.... Put on a series of community picnics and barbecues and have an open forum for listening. If people feel they are being listened to they are more likely to want to be involved in the process” (Runyon, McKenzie Watershed Council).
- “Listen and communicate back to other members your feelings. Be alert. Know what is going on. If answers are not at the table, find out where they are and make sure they get introduced. If there is a major question not getting answered, make sure it does” (Porter, Owl Mountain Partnership).
- “Listen to everyone on the committee with equal amounts of interest and effort and not allow personalities to be a part of it, even though they will be at times (Sherman, Owl Mountain Partnership).
- “Get to the crux of what someone is trying to say. Speak up and assist the person if the person is struggling. That takes expertise. You need to have an individual who knows how to draw that out of someone. If someone does have a particular issue, it has to be thoroughly discussed. Nothing can be scrapped because the group has not come to consensus” (Stewart, Nanticoke Watershed Alliance).

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- “Any time you can increase the informal aspect of the process and make opportunities to just talk, that’s good. Having lunch together and fieldtrips to conservation sites meant more opportunity for personal communication and the building of mutual respect –and I thought that was key to eventually dealing on an honest level” (Robinson, Clark County HCP).

Practice constructive behavior

- “Treat people fairly. Approach meetings from a positive perspective. Give people an opportunity to voice opinions and respect each other” (Parsons, Animas River Stakeholders Group).
- “Another word of advice is to participate! If you do not you will definitely not get heard. Your ideas will be ignored if nobody is aware of them” (Perino, Animas River Stakeholders Group).

Provide training

- “Bring all members along. If someone because of their background, education or training doesn’t understand then you have to take the time to sit them down and explain it to them. Go sit down and drink some coffee with them and explain things” (Jack, Owl Mountain Partnership)
- “State and federal agencies need lots of training with these groups because they often come in with too much arrogance. They need to learn how to talk to rural folks and explain the issues” (Pace, Scott River CRMP).
- “It’s crucial that everyone really have a common definition of what consensus means when they first begin the process” (Sommarstrom, Scott River CRMP).
- “(Ranchers should) get training in labor negotiations before they even think about coming to the table. Otherwise they just get creamed” (Loper, ¾ Circle Ranch CRM).

Think about individuals, not just interests

- “It helps to have strong personality traits in this process. Only boisterous extroverts succeed and survive. It’s basically a pool of sharks and the ones with biggest teeth win” (Shreiber, Clark County HCP).
- “The lesson I learned is that you pick your people carefully as to who is going to be at the table. Not just the interest groups but whom from those groups you work with. Maybe there needs to be a ground rule so you can kick people off you need to” (Sommarstrom, Scott River CRMP).

- “Everyone has to come into this process willing to give something. When there are people seeking their way or the highway, it won’t work” (Fowle, Scott River CRMP).
- “You really have to find the right individual to match the culture of the communication needed. You can’t just send a person in a three-piece business suit into a community where the culture is ranching and mining. That just doesn’t work” (Moore, Clark County HCP).

Utilize leadership

- “As long as your leadership is strong and the group has a good set of bylaws it seems like to me you can cope with differentials such as power and wealth (Cipolla, Nanticoke Watershed Alliance).
- “Agendas will always be there, so the key is to skillfully facilitate through them, which is damn difficult to do” (Budd-Fallon, Clark County HCP).
- Forums must be run well. Everyone there has to feel that they will be listened to and are going to be taken as seriously as everyone else. It is also incumbent upon the group to have a good facilitator...someone who can move the discussion around to people who are raising their hands or whatever. Keep things on track and make people feel like their points are worthwhile” (Zankel, Nanticoke Watershed Alliance).
- “It is important to set ground rules and to document them” (Terry, Nanticoke Watershed Alliance).

Build Trust

- “It boils down to developing a bit of trust in the other guy that he will reason with you fairly. There’s definitely a leap of faith involved” (Cunningham, ¾ Circle Ranch CRM).
- “You’ve got to have time. It’s that simple. Without the relationships between stakeholders that the passage of time allows, you get people holding back what they are willing to do because they fear they’ll be giving too much’ (Wiles, ¾ Circle Ranch CRM).

Other Insights

- “It is important for everyone to be aware of that potential (co-optation). I also think it is important to always question your assumptions stopping and considering the alternatives whether or not someone brings it up or not.” (Stribling, Nanticoke Watershed Alliance).
- “When you are frustrated but feel that you need to collect your thoughts and think about what you are going to say, I suggest writing a letter. If there is something in which I do not agree with the EPA, then I write them a letter so that they have a record of it and so

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do I. That way they can respond at the next meeting” (Clark, Animas River Stakeholders Group).

- Ideas should come from the locals and agencies should be prepared to take more of a backseat role, “That way you create local ownership and commitment to the process. In our case, you would not be able to draw upon and tap into that capability into the solution if you did not use them as an integral part of the solution” (Broetzman, Animas River Stakeholders Group).
- “People getting started need to think about what their recognition needs are” (Hall, Darby Partnership).
- “We all have alternates. You have to be attuned to burnout. Volunteer burnout is a very real thing” (Thompson, McKenzie Watershed Council).