Techniques that Foster Collaborative Groups

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Collaboration is a popular and frequently used method for managing differences among people within a group (Gray 1989). Collaboration can be defined as a method that brings together people with diverse perspectives, who choose to work together to achieve a shared objective. For example, many land management agencies are turning to collaboration that incorporates various perspectives including ranchers, hunters, hikers, landowners, etc. to reach agreement on objectives for a management plan.

Although people may form a group under the aim of collaboration, creating an atmosphere of collaboration that supports mutual respect and shared decision-making is a difficult challenge. This factsheet is written for community educators, leaders or volunteers working as either facilitators or as group members who want to foster collaboration within a group. Facilitators and groups who have built collaboration successfully used the techniques discussed in this factsheet. These techniques include ground rules and a consensus framework.

Ground Rules to Frame Expectations

Ground rules are explicit guidelines the group agrees to follow. Typically ground rules frame expectations on the way things should be done at meetings. A simple set of ground rules can include items such as when meetings will start, who is responsible for what, and how meetings will be run. Ground rules to frame expectations can either be presented to group members by the facilitator or they can be developed and discussed by the group. A simple set of ground rules could be called, Meeting Ground Rules and include some basic expectations of members and how meetings will be run (Lippincott 1994).

An example of “Meeting Ground Rules”

☐ Arrive and Start on Time
☐ Attend Meetings
☐ Be Prepared for Meetings
☐ Keep discussion to agenda items
☐ Turn cell phones to vibrate, no sound
☐ Minimize side conversations
☐ Be feasible when assigning tasks
☐ Be realistic when accepting tasks
☐ Share responsibility for the ground rules

Ground Rules for Effective Behavior

Ground rules can also outline process procedures, such as how decisions are made and how information is shared (Susskind 1999, Schwarz 1995). The purpose of ground rules on a process level are to help guide constructive behavior. An effective way for a
group facilitator to establish collaborative group behavior is to introduce a draft set of suggested ground rules at the first meeting. When trying to guide effective behavior, it is important for all members to discuss the ground rules. Discussing and creating the ground rules among the members will allow for group ownership in following the rules.

During the discussion of ground rules, the facilitator explains the purpose of the ground rules (i.e., to guide effective behavior) and encourages the group to discuss them. To illustrate how this may occur, the facilitator might say, “I drafted up some suggested ground rules we could all follow for today’s meeting. Although they are only suggestions, let’s go over the ground rules and see how people feel about following them.”

An example of “Suggested Ground Rules”:

- Focus on interests and ideas, not positions or solutions to the problem
- Listen to understand each idea and interest, ask questions
- Respect different viewpoints
- All ideas count, even “wild” ones
- Everyone is encouraged to participate
- Everyone is responsible for following the ground rules.
- Other ideas

"These ground rules are only suggested to help us start thinking about how we can work together more constructively. Does anyone have any comments or ideas they would like to discuss about these suggested ground rules?" "Are there rules or other ideas you would like to add or discuss?" "As the facilitator of the group, my role is not only to make sure everybody follows the ground rules, but also I will do my best to model these ground rules to demonstrate effective group behavior."

Even when ground rules are introduced and discussed, someone will eventually break a rule. For example, a group member may say, "I am here to stop future development in this community." This statement is a position, thereby breaking rule #1 as listed above. A facilitator who is modeling the ground rules would respond, "In keeping with our ground rules, let’s reframe your statement into an interest. Would you say your interest is to retain areas of open space?" A facilitator will use re-framing frequently to help members stick to the ground rules.

The ground rules should be written down on a large flip chart pad or board and posted for everyone to see at each meeting. For groups that continue to meet, they may want to print the ground rules on a colored 3x5 index card and laminate them. The overall purpose of ground rules is to help foster collaborative group interaction, not to restrict it. The group can change the ground rules or add new ones based on group needs.

Consensus Decision-Making Framework

The second technique that fosters collaboration is a consensus decision-making framework. Although consensus takes time to build and it is hard work for most people, it attempts to build group cohesion by incorporating everyone’s opinion.

There are many misconceptions around consensus, for example, that it takes too long or that everyone must agree unanimously on a decision. Consensus is reached when members mutually agree to a decision and feel as though their concerns regarding the issue have been addressed. Consensus is not unanimity.
Rather than approaching consensus from "I can live with it" perspective, the proposed alternative framework for arriving at consensus is based on a series of levels. This alternative framework allows groups more flexibility in building collaborative agreements. The framework includes five levels, but depending on group preferences, fewer may be appropriate. The suggested five levels include:

1. I can easily support the decision or action.
2. I can support the decision or action, but it may not be my preference.
3. I can support the decision or action with minor changes.
4. I support the will of the group, but I don't necessarily agree with the decision or action.
5. I cannot support the decision or action.

Using this framework a group approaches decision-making on an issue or topic showing their level of support. For example, the facilitator asks, "It seems as though many of you like this idea, let's get a reading on the level of support for the proposal. On the idea to use the Wildlife Division's data regarding elk population numbers, show your level of support." "Using your fingers, please hold up your hand with a 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5."

To foster collaboration a facilitator should ask additional questions for all levels of support expressed. "What were your reasons for providing a level 2 support?" However, for levels 4 & 5, direct questions need to be asked to bring forth participant concerns. "Bob, what are your specific reasons for a level 5?"

At times a collaborative group may be faced with contentious issues. When this occurs the facilitator may want to first use a secret "vote" to gauge how each member supports a decision. Asking people to either close their eyes or lower their heads, and raise-up their fingers to indicate their level of support could be one way to conduct a secret "vote". Conducting a secret straw "vote" may help alleviate the uncomfortable situation of placing one member as the lone wolf in a decision. A secret "vote" may also take some pressure off the lone person or a small group of people who feel coerced into consenting.

Group members may want to include in the ground rules what constitutes consensus. For example, does everyone in the group need a 1, 2, or 3 level of support? Groups that are in a time constraint, but still want to use consensus decision making can adopt a 70/30 rule. Asking 70% of members to have a level 4 or above to reach consensus. The 70/30 rule still fosters collaboration by creating a shared understanding among the group for each member's level of support.

Ground rules can help foster collaboration by laying out group expectations and behavior. A consensus framework helps build collaboration by providing a process for shared decision making. Collaboration among a group seems most successful when a supportive atmosphere is established early in the process and group members are given the opportunity to understand why and how potential decisions are supported.

References


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