Evaluating your group’s readiness to negotiate is a critical part of the pre-negotiation step of a collaborative process. Readiness to negotiate can be determined by addressing:

- process issues, or "how" things get done
- substance issues, or "what" the negotiation is about. Checklists for addressing the "what" of negotiations are in "Managing Natural Resource Disputes - No 6".

The following two checklists are designed to help citizens' or community groups focus on pertinent issues that may influence process or "how" things get done.

**Evaluating the "How" of Negotiating**

Ideally, the questions that follow should be answered with a "YES" to indicate that your group is ready to negotiate. A "no" is a "red-flag" indicating the issue needs some attention before proceeding.

1. ______ Can your group effectively "speak with one voice"?

"Speaking with one voice" is a negotiating strength. Hence, it may be an advantage for different interests in the community to be represented by a single group that can "speak with one voice". However, if the interests within the community conflict or if there is tension among those who represent the different interests in the community, it may be better for the community to speak with more than "one voice" to assure an equitable representation of all interests.

If your group chooses to "speak with one voice", sufficient time must be allocated for the team members to negotiate among themselves to develop internal consensus about the issues, their "one voice". This internal negotiation may be more difficult than the external negotiation with the other parties but is an essential step.
2. Is everyone who is in a position to undermine an agreement either represented or supportive of the negotiation?

Citizens' groups must decide who will be on their negotiating team to represent their constituents' interests. Although it may be easier to assemble a negotiating team with members who are all in agreement, in the end, those not included can sabotage the process. Being inclusive at the beginning may assure a sustainable agreement at the end.

3. Do team members have the time and resources to attend meetings?

Team members should have a reasonably clear idea of how much time will be involved to participate in the negotiation. Not only is time necessary for the external negotiations with other parties, but time must also be allocated for internal group meetings as well as individual study and learning. Often with citizens’ groups, members have other jobs and cannot devote their full attention to the issues at hand. It may be necessary, therefore, to hire individuals who can spend the time necessary to represent the interests effectively in the negotiation.

4. Do group members have a clear understanding about how decisions will be made and is there a process in place for ratification should agreement be reached?

How decisions are made is one of the major differences between government resource agencies and many citizens' groups. Agencies usually have an established decision-making process. If the citizens' group represents a coalition of interests, or if public entities are involved, developing a process for agreement and ratification may involve extensive discussions. Representatives of such groups must be clear about their authority in the negotiation and about what might be necessary to achieve final agreement.

5. Are there any legal or procedural constraints such as compliance with open meeting laws or the need to have group members vote for ratification that must be addressed?

Such concerns may impose limitations on how and when negotiations are held, who can participate, and how they should be structured. If your group makes decisions by consensus, time must be left for the negotiating team to consult with constituents. If the team represents the public, time must be allocated for public education.

6. Does the team have at least one skilled person responsible for monitoring and coaching the process?

In negotiations, the process is constantly changing. People easily overlook the importance of process, the "how", and focus, instead, almost exclusively on the issues, the "what". To assure an equitable and constructive negotiation, every group must be sensitive to and effectively participate in designing and monitoring the process.

7. Is the team willing to devote a portion of every session to an overview, review or discussion of process?

The "what" of negotiations often includes strong emotions that can easily overshadow review and discussion of process. Participants may believe it is a "waste" of time to discuss process concerns. It can help later on, however, if at the beginning, your group acknowledges the importance of process and group dynamics throughout the pre-negotiation and negotiation steps. This ongoing overview may take only a few minutes at the beginning of every session but should be done regularly.
8. ____ Does the team have a level of expertise in negotiation that is comparable to the level of expertise of other parties at the table?

If there is a disparity in level of expertise among the parties, the citizens' group must assure that differences in skill levels are addressed through ground rules or by hiring skilled personnel. This may involve bringing in an outside coach. Your group should not depend on the facilitator to bridge the gap in expertise (Susskind 1997). Training in negotiation may also be helpful.

Evaluating Group Dynamics

The following checklist can be used to evaluate a group's readiness to negotiate through its ability to function as a cohesive unit. It can also be useful during the negotiation for ongoing evaluation and monitoring, both of the citizens' group's *internal process* and of the *external process* of the negotiating group. If group members check the first alternative under any of the major headings, the group is well advised to discuss the concern before moving ahead with substance issues. The first alternative, in each case, is an indicator of a potential problem and should be seen as a "red flag" that deserves attention.

1. **Listening**
   - _____ Members don’t really listen to one another – they interrupt and don’t try to understand.
   - _____ All members really listen and try hard to understand.

2. **Open Communication**
   - _____ Members are guarded in discussions.
   - _____ Members express both thoughts and feelings openly.

3. **Mutual Trust and Confidence Within Group**
   - _____ Members evidence suspicion of one another's motives.
   - _____ Members trust one another and do not fear ridicule or reprisal.

4. **Attitude within Group toward Differences**
   - _____ Members avoid arguments, smooth over differences, suppress or avoid conflicts.
   - _____ Members not only respect and accept differences, they actively search for differences and work through them openly – they are not pressured to conform.

5. **Mutual Support Present**
   - _____ Members are defensive about their ideas.
   - _____ Members are able to give and receive help.

6. **Level of Involvement and Participation**
   - _____ Discussion is dominated by a few.
   - _____ All members are involved, free to participate in any way they choose.

7. **Control of Decision Making Clear**
   - _____ The chairperson controls the subject matter and makes decisions.
   - _____ All members accept responsibility for productive discussion and decisions.

8. **Procedures in Place to Respond to Changing Circumstances**
   - _____ Members find it hard to change procedures that do not work.
   - _____ Members readily change procedures in response to new situations.
9. **Member Resources Fully Utilized**
   - Each member's knowledge, abilities, and experience are not utilized.
   - Each member's knowledge, abilities, and experience are fully utilized.

10. **Objectives Clear and Understood**
    - Objectives are not clear or not understood.
    - Objectives are clear, are understood, and there is full commitment to them.

**ARE WE READY TO NEGOTIATE?**

Citizens' groups have a special challenge when evaluating and assessing their involvement in a collaborative process, especially when it comes to making a decision to participate in what could be a time consuming and resource intensive negotiation. Citizens' groups often depend on volunteers with many commitments for their time and attention. They may not have clear lines of authority for decision-making. They may not have access to professionals that are available to the other groups to analyze and evaluate data. They may not have professionals skilled in collaborative process. These factors can influence the success of negotiation where skills and resources do make a difference (Carpenter and Kennedy 1988; Susskind and Cruikshank 1987).

Taking time to use the checklists outlined should assist citizens' groups in determining their readiness to negotiate. This type of assessment and preparation is critical to increasing the probability of a successful negotiation and agreement.

By thinking about the questions posed in the checklists before negotiations groups can set process ground rules during the **pre-negotiation step** that will support their effort in the negotiation. Such preparation will enhance their ability to participate effectively in the negotiation. Additionally, these questions will help groups avoid potential problems during negotiations.

Checklists for addressing the substance of the negotiation or "what" the negotiation is about, are presented in the next fact sheet entitled, Dealing with Natural Resource Disputes - No. 6

**References**


The Field Program Associate in the Partnership for Rural Improvement, Northwest Educational Laboratory, (NWREL), 1978

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