

COLLABORATIVE WATERSHED PLANNING IN NORTH CAROLINA

Working Together to Find Solutions That Work!

COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Searching for solutions to water quality problems can lead to difficult choices. When working in a group it is easy for each person to focus his or her attention on a favorite solution. Then when you discuss options, each group member gets locked into defending their own position. Little attention is given to understanding the interests behind the positions. In such a contentious atmosphere the choice you face will likely lead to a win/lose outcome, an impasse, or a compromise that satisfies neither side.

In contrast, a discussion that allows for an understanding of each party's underlying interests:

- Moves people away from contending positions
- Promotes mutual education
- Allows a cooperative atmosphere to develop
- Encourages the generation of many options
- Permits the search for a creative solution

PRINCIPLES OF COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

One of the most effective ways to solve a public issue is through a collaborative process.

Collaboration is an inclusionary process that promotes lateral communication and shared decision-making. The following principles¹ have been identified from case studies of successful processes:

- **Purpose-Driven.** People need a reason to participate in the process.
- **Inclusive, Not Exclusive.** All parties with a significant interest in the issue should be involved.
- **Educational.** The process relies on the use of the best available information and allows for collaborative inquiry.
- **Voluntary.** The parties who are affected or interested participate voluntarily.
- **Self-Designed.** All parties have an equal opportunity to participate in designing the process. The process must be explainable and designed to meet the circumstances and needs of the situation.
- **Flexible.** Flexibility should be designed into the process to accommodate changing issues, data needs, political environment, and programmatic constraints such as time and meeting arrangements.
- **Egalitarian.** All parties have equal access to relevant information and the opportunity to participate effectively throughout the process.
- **Respectful.** Acceptance of the diverse values, interests, and knowledge of the parties involved in the collaborative process is essential.
- **Accountable.** The participants are accountable both to their constituencies and to the process that they have agreed to establish.
- **Time Limited.** Realistic deadlines are necessary throughout the process.
- **Achievable.** Commitments to implementation and effective monitoring are essential parts of any agreement.

¹ Ten principles of collaborative problem solving can be found in [Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future: Putting Principles into Practice](#) by Gerald Cormick, et al., National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy, Ottawa, Canada, 1996. The eleventh principle, "Educational" was added by the author.

SEEKING CONSENSUS

Consensus is the decision rule that allows collaborative problem solving to work. Consensus prevents the decision from being driven entirely by power politics. It allows people to build trust and share information, especially under conditions of conflict. Consensus does not mean that everyone will be equally happy with the decision, but rather, all will accept the decision. It is not realistic for groups to require that all decisions be made by consensus. Groups that require unanimous agreement risk being held hostage by a demanding member. Instead, groups should seek consensus, they should go the extra mile to find solutions that meet the interests and concerns of everyone. If an agreement cannot be reached – if consensus cannot be achieved – each participant is free to exercise his or her next best alternative to a negotiated outcome.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT CONSENSUS

Many people are reluctant to engage in consensus decision-making, often because of some common misconceptions about what they have to give up.

“I will give up authority” Decision-making authority of senior managers, elected and appointed officials, and others is crucial to the consensus decision making process. The fear of giving up authority in order to reach agreement is unfounded. Unless the stakeholders support the agreement, there won't be one. This includes those who need to maintain their decision-making authority.

“I will be pressured to betray my constituents” Most people believe that consensus means compromise, and that everyone must sacrifice what they need in order to reach agreement. This is not true. Consensus agreements reflect outcomes that are better for each stakeholder than his or her next best option. Stakeholders are free to walk away if they cannot get what they need through negotiation.

“I will have to help my enemies” You are negotiating to meet your own interests. The most effective means of meeting your own interests is often to assist the other parties get what they need as well. The goal of consensus building is to get what you need, not to injure the other side.

“I will be forced to abandon my principles” Every participant is free to disagree with whatever is being proposed during a discussion. This is true even if you can't express exactly why you are not happy with a decision.

PRINCIPLES OF CONSENSUS

- Everyone must actively participate
- All group members must have a common base of information
- The group must create an atmosphere in which everyone feels free to state his/her views and to disagree
- Disagreements must be respected; they can illuminate unrecognized problems and serve as a catalyst for improving the decision
- When someone disagrees, the goal of the group is to discover the unmet need that has produced the objection and to find a way to meet that need in a revised agreement.

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