Best Practices: Running an Effective Collaborative Meeting

The effectiveness of meetings plays a vital role in the success of a collaborative group. It's important to pay attention to the details of meetings because they are very expensive events in terms of people's time and travel. Plus, no one wants to go to a poorly run meeting, and there can be enough challenges in finding agreement without struggling over preventable issues.

Keys

- ***Relationships*:** Collaboration doesn't happen without building relationships. Are your meetings set up to support joint learning, group decision-making, and people connecting with each other?
- ***Transparency*:** Does everyone know when and where meetings are held, how decisions are made, what is expected of them, where to find information, and how to participate?
- ***Vision:*** How will the work done at this meeting help the group achieve its longer term objectives? People have limited tolerance for meetings, so it's critical to have a clearly defined group vision of what the collaborative is trying to achieve and how the work you get done at the meeting will move the group toward that vision.

Before the Meeting

- It's likely your collaborative has a small group of people who are helping coordinate the meetings. Make sure this group represents the diversity of interests of people at the table.
- Recognize that at times different people might be needed to attend the meeting. For example, if the meeting is going to focus on decision-making, it might be important to include individuals with the appropriate authority, in addition to regular attendees.
- When will the meeting be held? Often, in order to get everyone there, a community-based collaborative will need to schedule meetings in the evenings.
- Communicate in advance and circulate reminders about when and where the meeting will be held. It can be helpful for a first meeting to also send a list of invited participants so that everyone knows who and what to expect. Generally it is best to avoid surprises.
- Talk about where to hold the meeting so everyone is comfortable with the location. Often collaborative stewardship groups choose not to meet at Forest Service offices because of the perception of an imbalance of power, or the feeling that the agency is "running the show", especially when there's been a history of distrust amongst the agency and the community. For some groups, meeting at a Forest Service office poses no problem. The same perception problems could arise if the meeting was held at a timber company or environmental group's offices. It's important to be responsive to the feelings of your group members. Community centers, libraries, grange halls, and other community meeting spaces work well and are often low or no cost.
- Develop an agenda that enables people to participate in the meeting, and isn't just full of presentations where participants are "talked at". Be sure the agenda is clear about the objectives of each session. Will a decision be made, or is the session for information and discussion?
- Decide if you need a neutral facilitator or if a group member will run the meeting. The facilitator can help your group design the meeting agenda. Facilitators can be especially useful when a collaborative group is first beginning to meet, and when an issue of conflict is interfering with group process or dynamics.

During the Meeting

Big Picture Items

- Does everyone already know each other? Name tents or tags are amazingly useful tools in making sure people at least know to whom they're talking. Introductions where people are asked to share why they are attending or what they hope to get out of the meeting can help "level the playing field" between participants when it becomes more clear there is a shared interest or goals.
- Clarify roles if necessary. For example, who convened the meeting and why? Are Forest Service employees serving as members of the collaborative, or are they present to share information? Is a group member chairing the meeting, or do you have a neutral facilitator in that role? Is everyone who attends the meeting welcome to participate in the discussion, or are non-members asked to observe only?
- How will you handle conflict during the meeting? Groups sometimes "bin" issues that are not resolvable in a short time frame and require committee attention, a separate meeting of the groups in conflict, or perhaps an agreement to leave that issue out of collaborative discussions. Does the group need more information to make a decision about an issue? Whatever your strategy, it's important to expect conflict and constructively respond to it.

Important Details

- Does your collaborative have ground rules laying out expectations for how people will interact with each other? If you don't have ground rules, consider creating them as a group a the beginning of the meeting. Even a simple list of things like asking people to turn off their cell phones, limit side conversations, listen and then only add new ideas, and speak respectfully can make a huge difference in the tone and feeling of the meeting. Make sure the ground rules are posted and known to all participants. Refer to them as needed during the meeting.
- Identify agenda items for the next meeting, and set the next meeting date and time.
- Start and end on time (you could ask attendees to help you keep track of the time).
- Review the agenda as a group at the beginning of meeting to enable members to add items or comment.
- Make sure someone is responsible for taking notes.
- Give opportunities for all participants to speak. Every group has the "talkers" and those who prefer to keep quiet. Consider going around the room once in a while and ask each person to comment on a particular issue or question, or open the conversation up to the group as a whole. Example: "Would anyone like to speak about that?"
- Consider "taking the temperature" of the group to learn how people are feeling about the meeting or overall direction. This doesn't have to be a formal evaluation, but could be as simple as taking five minutes to write a list of things that went well and areas of improvement for the next time.
- Food is always helpful in breaking down barriers and making meetings more enjoyable. Recognize the power of coffee and cookies!
- Do all of your meetings need to take place inside? Often a field trip to a project site can be more productive than looking at a map on a table. Field trips can also ensure that the gifts of the "hands-on" are as equally recognized as the gifts of the "thinkers."

After the meeting

- Circulate meeting notes soon after the meeting (within a week, preferably) so people are clear about any follow up tasks and those who were unable to attend can learn what happened.
- Post information where everyone can access it. Try having a copy of the report at the library, a poster at the post office or grocery store, and/or on a website.