

CHOOSING STAKEHOLDERS

A Key Step in a Collaborative Process

Corder/Thompson & Associates

Increasingly there is a demand to convene negotiating groups to reach consensus on solutions to community problems. These groups are made up of stakeholders—those segments of the community that are affected by or have a “stake” in the decision: citizen groups, funding sources, service providers, government regulators, environmentalists, consumers, etc.

Involvement in the community problem-solving processes is important for several reasons:

- to assure that the decision addresses as many different stakeholder interests as possible;
- to increase the probability of a creative outcome;
- to build broad-based support for the decision made by the negotiating group; and
- to facilitate implementation of the decision.

When involving stakeholders and using a consensus-based process, conveners face a major challenge: how to select a group of stakeholders who will be seen as inclusive and representative, and will be clear on their roles and prepared to work effectively together on the problem.

In order to increase the probability of a successful collaborative process, at least four categories of issues related to stakeholders should be addressed:

- clarifying appropriate levels of participation by different groups and establishing mechanisms for that participation;
- deciding on the composition of the negotiating or decision-making group;
- specifying the desired characteristics of participants in the group; and
- deciding how representatives will be selected.

LEVEL OF DECISION-MAKING AUTHORITY

One of the first decisions to be made in any collaborative initiative is what role stakeholders will have in the decision-making process. Conveners have a number of choices in the level of stakeholder involvement which might be appropriate for a specific issue.

A convening entity makes a decision and provides information to the relevant public. Sometimes groups of stakeholders are convened for the purpose of being informed about decisions or policies that affect them. In these processes, the convener is educating the stakeholders about what will happen, answering their questions

completely, and providing them with a name and number in case future questions or problems arise.

A convening entity solicits input and then makes the decision. In many cases, a decision-making entity will retain the authority to make a decision after considering input. Input can be solicited in a variety of ways: public meetings, televised town meetings, interactive workshops, surveys, focus groups held in neighborhoods, a web page that allows the public to make comments, etc.

A convening entity convenes a group to make a consensus recommendation. In some instances the convening entity wants the best thinking and problem-solving efforts of a group of stakeholders and at the same time needs to retain the authority to make the final decision. It is extremely important that the members of the group understand that their role is to make recommendations and not to make a decision.

A convening entity shares the decision-making role with stakeholders. With this strategy, the convening entity becomes one representative negotiating with representatives from other stakeholder groups. Each negotiator (including the original agency) maintains their authority to veto any decision which will not meet their interests. In many cases the negotiation is convened with the understanding that if an impasse occurs, the convening entity will make the decision, taking into account the concerns of the participants.

Processes involving a negotiating group often include a variety of ways for members of the public who are not at the table to have input into the process: public meetings, surveys, focus groups, etc.

COMPOSITION OF THE COLLABORATIVE GROUP

For collaborative processes, the composition of the group is very important. Often there is a tension between the desire to include everyone who wants to be at the table and the need to have a group that is a reasonable size for decision making. In deciding on the composition of the group, a number of factors should be considered.

Keeping the Size of the Group Manageable

One of the most important considerations when establishing a negotiating or decision-making group is the size of the group. The most frequent challenge is to keep the group to a size that allows members to participate actively and communicate effectively, permits the process to be completed in a finite time frame, and fosters creativity in seeking solutions. The optimum size group is between 8 and 20.

Inviting the Appropriate Stakeholder Representatives

- Who has official decision-making authority on this issue? Begin with those agencies or individuals who have an official role in the decision: funding sources, organizational or agency leaders, public officials, etc.

- Who has the power to implement the solution? Consider who will have to live with and implement the decision, policy or program on a daily basis. Often successful implementation of a decision is hindered if the process did not involve those who will be implementing the outcome.
- Who has the power to block the decision? Which groups may organize opposition through lawsuits, demonstrations, funding or legislation? Often there is reluctance to involve representatives of these groups. However, if they are not involved in the process, they may block the implementation of the decision.
- Who may have little power, but is still affected by the outcome? Many members of the public may not have organized themselves into groups and yet their involvement, support and insight will be crucial to finding a lasting solution. For example, low income neighborhoods, local merchants, minority communities, or retired citizens may need to be informed about how the issue may affect them, how to access the decision-making process, or how to organize themselves to have a stronger voice in the process.

Maintaining a Balance of Interests

It is important to keep in mind that a single group might have a number of interests and that several groups might have the same interests. Those planning the process need to avoid a situation where there is a large number of representatives who care about some interests and a limited number who care about other interests. Since the group is not voting, numbers are not important in this sense. However, when the numbers representing different interests are not balanced, the group is more likely to push for voting as a means of making decisions. In addition, it can be difficult to balance the amount of discussion time given to all interests represented at the negotiating table.

Offering Alternative Ways to Participate

Not all stakeholders may want to be at the negotiating table. Sometimes there are variations in the degree of involvement in the process desired by stakeholders. These differences could be related to such things as differences in the kind of impact the decision will have on stakeholders, the time they have available to participate in the process, or perceived threats or advantages related to the decision. In some kinds of collaborative processes, different stakeholders may be involved at different levels:

- being an observer of the process;
- providing input to a representative who is seated at the negotiating table; or
- providing input in written form or at a public meeting

Making different roles in the process available can be an effective strategy for involving people who will not be at the table, but want to be involved in the process.

CHARACTERISTICS OF STAKEHOLDER REPRESENTATIVES

Sometimes it is helpful for stakeholders to have some guidelines for choosing their representatives. For example, stakeholder groups might be advised to choose representatives who have the following characteristics:

- Representatives who have the support and confidence of their group. It is important that the group is confident that their representative will effectively represent their interests. The representative also needs to be able to communicate effectively the work and the decisions of the negotiating group to the stakeholder group.
- Representatives who can make the time commitment to actively participate in the entire process. In many cases, the negotiating group is going to meet several times over a period of weeks or months. It is disruptive to the negotiating group and to the process if the membership of the negotiating group changes over the course of the negotiations.
- Representatives who can work effectively with others who may have different styles and interests. Negotiating groups typically are composed of individuals who have very different ideas about what would be an ideal situation. It is important that representatives be able to listen to and acknowledge the perspective of other group members and to work effectively with individuals whose style is different than theirs.
- Representatives who have knowledge relevant to the issue or are willing to acquire the information required for effective problem solving. Often participating in collaborative processes requires in-depth information about the issues in order to arrive at good substantive solutions. Sometimes this involves dealing with technical information. It is important that all group members have sufficient information to participate effectively in the process. Some may bring much of that information to the table; others may acquire much of the information during the process.

STRATEGIES FOR SELECTING STAKEHOLDER REPRESENTATIVES

There are a variety of possible strategies for selecting representatives for decision-making groups:

- Stakeholder groups select their own representatives. This process can be used in a variety of situations. Once stakeholder groups that should be represented in the negotiating group have been identified, they can be given the list of characteristics for stakeholder representatives and asked to select their representatives. If there are multiple groups that will be represented by one negotiator, the groups can caucus to select a representative. Sometimes it is useful to provide a neutral facilitator to assist them with this process.
- The convening entity appoints a steering committee of representatives of key stakeholder groups and the steering committee selects representatives to invite to participate in the negotiation group. Often a steering committee is established to assist with selecting stakeholder representatives and with designing the process. Typically the steering committee will be composed of people who are closely identified with key interests related to the issue and who also are considered credible in the community.
- The convening entity selects the representatives. The convening entity identifies key interests and representatives of those interests and invites them to participate in the group.
- Attendees at an open public meeting select representatives to participate in the decision-making process. This strategy is often used when it is difficult to identify organized groups representing different stakeholder interests. Interests can be

identified at the meeting and then those with similar interests can select representatives.

- Use the first meeting of the stakeholder group to explore whether any key interest is not represented. The representatives involved in the negotiating group often are the best sources of information about whether or not any key interests are not represented in the group. Time at the initial meeting can be set aside for this discussion and then the group can agree on ways to get representatives of any missing interests.
- Consider the possibility of adding representatives as the process proceeds. Sometimes in spite of the best efforts to identify all relevant stakeholders, as the process proceeds, the group discovers that an important interest is not represented. If this occurs, a representative can be added, or the group can decide on other creative ways to make sure those interests are addressed by solutions that are proposed.

Making public the criteria for participating in the negotiating group is important both to the perception that the selection process was fair and to the credibility of the process. This is especially important when there are more groups who want a specific representative to be a member of the negotiating group than there are seats at the table. Publishing the selection criteria also adds to the credibility of the collaborative decision-making process.

For collaborative public processes to be effective, it is important to spend the time that is necessary to make sure that key stakeholder groups are represented at the table. The decisions made by the negotiating group will have more credibility if those who are affected by the decision believe that their interests were adequately represented in the decision-making process.

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