



Knowledge Synthesis

MANAGING THE COMMUNITY COLLABORATION PROCESS

Ian Wong

July 2009

INTRODUCTION

This knowledge synthesis is part of The Monieson Centre's Knowledge Impact in Society (KIS) Project, a three-year endeavour to connect academic knowledge with economic development needs in Eastern Ontario. The synthesis is an accessible presentation of the latest research on issues affecting rural Eastern Ontario. The knowledge synthesis topics were determined through information gathered at 15 community workshops run in partnership with the Eastern Ontario Community Futures Development Corporation network. The KIS Project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. For more information, visit www.easternontarioknowledge.ca.

Community members must *collaborate* in order to make decisions, come up with new ideas, initiate new projects, and produce long-term social and economic change. While collaboration has the potential to be constructive, it cannot be assumed that positive results will inevitably follow when community members work together. Collaboration is often a challenging process that can be characterized by conflict, a clashing of personalities, and power struggles. This is especially the case when there is a high level of interdependency amongst stakeholders, and when stakeholders come from diverse backgrounds.¹ Accordingly, in order for communities to fully benefit from collaboration, the collaboration process must be effectively managed.

An example of a multi-party collaboration project that was initiated by the Government of Canada's Rural Secretariat is the Community Collaboration Project (CCP). This project (2005-2008) created a forum for various stakeholders to communicate and make decisions. In particular, this project formed a collaborative arrangement between communities in four regions of Manitoba and the Kivalliq region of Nunavut; federal, provincial and territorial government departments and agencies; non-government organizations; and the Rural Development Institute (RDI) of Brandon University.² The purpose of this project was to develop trusting relationships and increase communication between stakeholders as well as to explore new models of decision-making and governance among communities and governments.

¹ J. Edelenbos and E. Klijn, "Managing Stakeholder Involvement in Decision Making: A Comparative Analysis of Six Interactive Processes in the Netherlands," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 16 (2005); pp 417-446.

² Robert Annis, *Community Collaboration Project: Empowering Communities and Building Capacity* (Brandon: Brandon University, 2008), http://www.brandonu.ca/rdi/Factsheets/CCP_ModelsProjectFactsheet-July2007.pdf (Accessed July 15, 2009).

This collaborative venture was successful because stakeholders were able to effectively work together in spite of their differing interests and agendas.

BENEFITTING FROM COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

The purpose of this knowledge synthesis is to provide guidance to community stakeholders from various backgrounds on how to best collaborate and work together *in a group or team-based context*. This knowledge synthesis assumes that community members have already decided to come together as a working group to collaborate. The following paragraphs describe how such groups can be most effective and successfully achieve their goals.

The following issues will be described in greater detail:

- How do stakeholders most effectively make decisions?
- How do stakeholders most effectively generate new ideas and foster creativity and innovation?
- How do stakeholders most effectively deal with conflict?

EFFECTIVE DECISION MAKING

Decision making is a key activity in the collaboration process. For example, community members make decisions on policy and procedures, initiatives in which to engage, and how to allocate resources. The following strategies can be used to create a successful and fair decision making process.

Assign Roles and Establish the Process

The first step in the decision making process is to designate roles. At the very least, there should be a process manager, a timekeeper, and a recorder of information. These roles ensure that the decision making progress is organized and systematic. Designating a process manager is critical because he or she is responsible for leading and guiding the decision making process. It is recommended that the process manager follow a general decision making approach developed by researchers called the “rational model of group decision making” (See Appendix A for an elaboration of the model).³ This classic model suggests that decision making is an integrated sequence of activities that includes:

- a) Defining the problem
- b) Gathering, interpreting, and exchanging information
- c) Choosing among alternatives
- d) Implementing the decision

Define the Problem

After roles are assigned and the decision making approach is agreed upon, group members must then clearly define what it is that they want to accomplish. In other words, what is the key issue(s) and what is the key decision(s) that must be reached? It is important to be explicit and clear about the goals of the process at the outset, because this will help focus subsequent discussions and ensure that the discussions stay on track.

³ Leigh Thompson, *Making the Team: A Guide for Managers*. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2004), p 127.

Gather, Interpret, and Exchange Information

Having decided on what decision(s) must be reached, the group must gather, interpret, and exchange information pertaining to the problem. This is a very important stage of the decision-making process. Group members bring information and knowledge to the table and share their interests, concerns, and opinions. Often, group members will have conflicting viewpoints and this conflict will need to be managed effectively. Since conflict management is such an important issue in group dynamics, a section will be devoted to it later in this knowledge synthesis.

During this stage, the process manager acts as a facilitator and plays a critical role. He or she must ensure that there is equal participation among group members.⁴ Often what can happen in group discussions is that one or two people in the group do all the talking which can impede effective information exchange. This dominating behaviour must be prevented and, as such, the process manager must have the ability to direct the discussion and seek input from those who are participating less than others. The goal of this stage is to ensure that everyone's interests and concerns are voiced and addressed if possible.

The outcome of this stage in the decision making process is for group members to come up with a list of alternative courses of action to be chosen by the group. It is recommended that group members use a whiteboard or some sort of visual aid to write out each of the alternatives and each member's initial preferences.⁵

Choose Among Alternatives

In choosing an alternative, as much as possible, group members should first strive for consensus. Consensus-building is a process in which the discussion of the alternatives continues and all of the stakeholder's interests are continually voiced, heard, and respected.⁶ This process ensures that group members gain an in-depth *understanding* of the issues with respect to each alternative. Ideally, this process will generate a high-quality agreement, one with which most stakeholders are happy.⁷ If consensus building does not produce an agreement, then voting (majority rule) can be used. The drawback with voting is that it can produce a low quality agreement, one in which conflict soon reappears and stakeholders demand to revisit the entire decision making process.

Implement the Decision

To implement a decision, the group must decide who will carry out the course of action. This is particularly important when people from different levels of government come together to make a decision. When towns, counties, and provincial/federal departments all have a hand in a decision, they may have difficulty avoiding duplication of services. To address this issue, all group members must be absolutely clear about who will do what. This can be done by making a detailed list of the deliverables and assigning tasks to different individuals (or groups of individuals). It is vital for this to be agreed-upon and documented. After this is done, the individuals who are taking action must be held accountable; they should be responsible to keep other group members up-to-date on how the implementation of the

⁴ Leigh Thompson, *The Mind and Heart of the Negotiator*. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2005), p 215.

⁵ Thompson, *Mind and Heart*, p 214.

⁶ Judith E. Inness, "Consensus Building: Clarifications for the Critics," *Planning Theory* 3 (2004): pp 5-20.

⁷ J.E. Innes and D.E. Booher, "Consensus Building and Complex Adaptive Systems," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 65 (1999): pp 412-423.

plan is coming along and any deviations from the plan. Also, if possible, the group should meet again to evaluate the success of the decision.

EFFECTIVE IDEA GENERATION

Throughout the collaboration process, team members may wish to come up with creative solutions to problems. Innovation and creativity can be fostered by using formal techniques to generate new ideas. The most common approach to idea generation is brainstorming.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a group activity in which ideas are shared freely without being judged or evaluated (at the outset). When conducted effectively, brainstorming can considerably increase the quality and quantity of ideas produced by group members.⁸ The following rules can be applied:

- **Expressiveness** – No matter how strange or fanciful, group members should communicate any idea that arises. Group members should “freewheel” whenever possible.
- **Non-evaluation** – Group members should withhold criticism during the idea generation phase.
- **Quantity** – Group members should strive for quantity of ideas, because more ideas increase the chances of finding excellent solutions.
- **Building** – Group members should be encouraged to build on the ideas suggested by others whenever possible.

Nominal Group Technique

More recent research has suggested a variation on standard brainstorming that has been shown to be extremely effective. It is known as the *Nominal Group technique*.⁹ This technique involves an initial stage of “brainwriting” – individual, written brainstorming – for about 10 to 15 minutes before the interactive brainstorming described above. Once members have come up with ideas on their own, they then share them one-by-one. The ideas are noted on a flip-chart or whiteboard. The ideas are then further discussed and clarified. The Nominal Group Technique is effective because it ensures a democratic representation of all members’ ideas.

EFFECTIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict often arises when individuals who have differing interests and agendas must make decisions together. In a community context, conflict can arise between various levels of government. For instance, when a new infrastructure project is initiated (e.g., building a new road), multiple stakeholders, including local, provincial and federal governments, often share responsibilities for different aspects of the project. In this context, complex decisions about resource allocations must be made. In addition to budgetary concerns, stakeholders may disagree on which projects should be initiated in the first place, and the timeline associated with the projects.

⁸ Thomson, *Making the Team*, p 185.

⁹ A. L. Delbecq and A. H. Van de Ven, “A Group Process Model for Identification and Program Planning,” *Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences* 7 (1971): pp 466-492.

Types of Conflict

When one thinks of conflict, one may simply assume that it is bad and must be eliminated. However, research shows that this is not the case. There are some instances where conflict can be productive and others where conflict can be destructive. Researchers have recognized two principal types of conflict, namely, task or cognitive conflict, and relationship or affective conflict. Task conflict emerges when group members have divergent viewpoints about a task or an issue, but stay focused on solving problems caused by their differences. Relationship conflict emerges when group members attack each other personally, assign blame to each other, dislike each other because of personality clashes, and lash out emotionally.

Research has shown that task conflict can be productive. This is because task-related conflict can lead to discussions that force group members to analyze their problems in greater detail. This, in turn may lead to more creative thinking and overall better decision making. On the other hand, relationship conflict is associated with declines in productivity, because it lowers the morale of the group and makes it less likely for group members to come to an agreement.¹⁰

Conflict Management Techniques

Community leaders can use conflict management techniques to reap the benefits of task conflict and minimize relationship conflict. Flanagan and Runde describe a number of useful techniques:¹¹

- **Create a Climate of Trust**

In order for group members to be able to discuss their ideas candidly, they must be willing to make themselves vulnerable to other members. This means that groups need to create a climate of trust that allows each member to share their opinions honestly and take risks without feeling like they will be attacked personally.¹² Such a climate is best established at the outset. Group members can agree that the discussion is a safe place to be frank and open about ideas and that critiques are directed at the ideas and not at the person. This can prevent task-related discussions from morphing into relationship conflict.

- **Avoid Destructive Behaviours**

Certain behavioural tendencies in group discussions are destructive and should be avoided at all costs. They include:

- **Winning at all costs** (attempting to get “your way” no matter what)
- **Avoiding** (withdrawing from the conflict altogether)
- **Demoting others** (devaluing others or using sarcastic language)
- **Retaliating** (actively or passively trying to “get even”)
- **Hiding emotions** (concealing one’s true feelings)

- **Use Constructive Communication Approaches**

Techniques can be used to help team members cool down, slow down, and engage constructively in the face of conflict. These include:

¹⁰ T. Flanagan and C. Runde, “How Teams Can Capitalize on Conflict,” *Strategy & Leadership* 37 (2009): pp 20-22.

¹¹ Flanagan and Runde.

¹² Amy Edmonson, “Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44 (1999): pp 350-383.

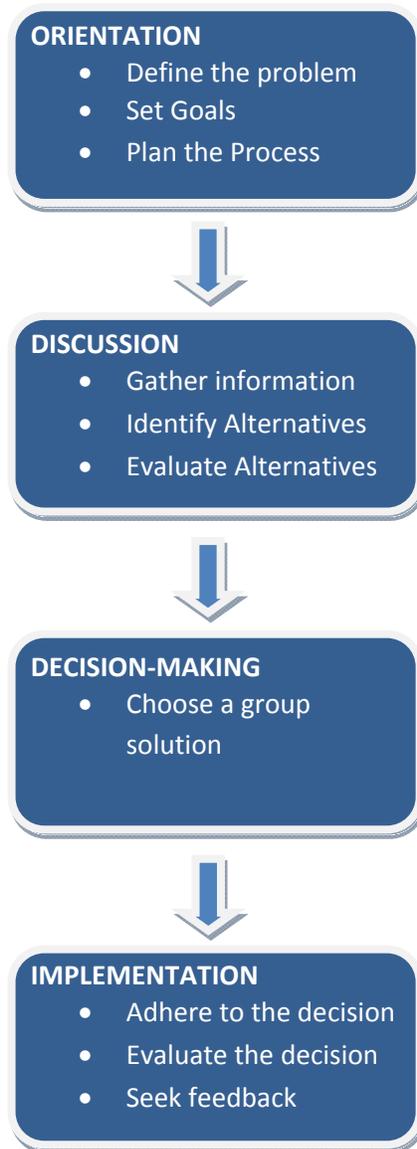
- **Self-awareness** – Group members can reflect on and become aware of the kinds of situations that “set them off”. Being mindful of these reactions can allow group members to recognize and regulate their emotions during conflict.
- **Delay responding** – Group members can benefit from taking a brief time-out before responding to a “hot” issue. A brief pause can allow group members to calm down and reflect.
- **Perspective taking** – Group members can demonstrate that they comprehend, respect, and value the positions of other group members. They can do this by verbally acknowledging each other’s points of view. This approach creates a feeling of respect even in the face of disagreements.
- **Active listening** – The goal of active listening is for the listener of a message to provide feedback to the sender of the message to clarify communication. The listener can do this by paraphrasing what the sender has said and by asking whether this is correct. Active listening demonstrates that the listener cares about understanding the message and allows the sender to clarify communication if needed.¹³

¹³ Daniel Levi, *Group Dynamics for Teams*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), p 102.

REFERENCES

- Annis, Robert. *Community Collaboration Project: Empowering Communities and Building Capacity*. Brandon: Brandon University, 2008.
http://www.brandonu.ca/rdi/Factsheets/CCP_ModelsProjectFactsheet-July2007.pdf (Accessed July 15, 2009)
- Delbecq, A. L. & Van de Ven, A. H. "A Group Process Model for Identification and Program Planning." *Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences* 7 (1971): 466-492.
- Edelenbos, J. & Klijn, E. "Managing Stakeholder Involvement in Decision Making: A Comparative Analysis of Six Interactive Processes in the Netherlands." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 16 (2005): 417-446.
- Edmonson, Amy. "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44 (1999): 350-383.
- Flanagan, T. & Runde, C. "How Teams Can Capitalize on Conflict." *Strategy & Leadership* 37 (2009): 20-22.
- Inness, J. & Booher, D. E. "Consensus Building and Complex Adaptive Systems." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 65 (1999): 412-423.
- Inness, Judith E. "Consensus Building: Clarifications for the Critics." *Planning Theory* 3 (2004): 5-20.
- Levi, Daniel, *Group Dynamics for Teams*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007.
- Thompson, Leigh. *The Mind and Heart of the Negotiator*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2005.
- Thompson, Leigh. *Making the Team: A Guide for Managers*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2004.

APPENDIX A - A RATIONAL MODEL OF GROUP DECISION MAKING¹⁴



¹⁴ Leigh Thompson, *Making the Team*, p 127.