

## Organizing for Collaborative Action



Research and experience suggest that most successful collaborative efforts fully consider and integrate the five organizing principles displayed above. In practice, these principles are not necessarily addressed in a sequential manner, may vary in importance, and often overlap.

### Five Organizing Principles

#### 1. Scanning the Situation

It is important for stakeholders to assess their collaborative environment prior to initiating a planning effort. The community or regional situation influences the overall context for collaborative planning. Examples of factors to consider:

- Community trends
- Rate and types of social, economic, and ecological change
- Natural resource interests
- Social communication networks
- Past stewardship efforts
- Level of trust and cooperation

In addition, stakeholders need to think about and understand the skills and resources available in the community (this includes non-profit organizations; local, regional, state, and federal agencies) to support collaboration and the additional skills and resources that might be needed for a successful collaborative planning effort.

#### 2. Identifying Values and Principles

All stakeholders—in the USFS, other agencies, Tribes and the community—will hold key values and principles that will guide and sustain the collaborative planning process. Some stakeholders will be happy with merely increasing communication about a planning effort, while others will want to expand the decision space or participate in creating management solutions and alternatives.

Different stakeholder leaders may have varying levels of investment in the collaborative process, desired outcomes and priorities. Once described and documented, these principles and values will serve to guide the collaborative process, serving as milestones for success and accomplishment.

### **3. Identifying Opportunities and Selecting Methods**

Collaborative methods need to be chosen based on the collective values, principles desired planning outcomes, and the capacity and/or interest in the community to participate in a collaborative effort. Some outcomes are best achieved through one or more open houses, field trips, open public meetings, or working groups that focus on specific questions or topics through a series of sessions (just to name a few).

It is far more advantageous to design the collaborative process around methods that will accomplish the planning objectives—and which are based on the local context, capacities, principles and values, and expectations of the community and the management unit—than to merely gather up so-called “public comments” that may have little value. Public comment obtained without a strategic purpose will most likely fail to contribute appropriately to building a better strategic plan or specific project, improving stewardship opportunities, or otherwise facilitating meaningful collaboration.

### **4. Setting Clear Expectations and Commitments**

All stakeholders will have expectations about the planning process with regard to roles, time frames, key events and phases, levels of communication, intended outcomes, and similar topics. If these expectations are not clear—when resource data will be available, for example, or how often community groups will get together, or where community input fits within specific plan documents—a basic foundation for collaboration cannot be achieved. Conversely, having clear expectations keeps the ongoing work understandable, rewarding, and focused. Stakeholders are kept informed, are clear about how their contributions are being used, and can look ahead to mutually agreed upon benefits and outcomes.

Linked with expectations are commitments, which represent the level of resources, capacity, and ongoing responsibilities that are obligated in a variety of ways by participants to the process. Stakeholders need to define tasks, roles, responsibilities, commitments, and timeframes so everyone has a clear understanding of what they are committing to in the collaborative planning process. The strength of these combined commitments will strongly benefit the collaborative process, making it far more likely that desired expectations will be met.

### **5. Monitoring Progress**

The adaptive and emergent nature of most collaborative processes suggests that it needs to be monitored for success and challenges throughout the process. Collaborative planning efforts evolve over time as the process is implemented because the efforts are cumulative in the sense that problem solving resources will be increased, working agreements will enhance capacities, and relationships will be expanded.

Monitoring focuses on the very factors that have been assessed in designing the overall collaborative process: linkages to the situation or context, including relationships and collaborative capacities; adherence and commitment to selected values and principles; the relative accomplishment of mutually agreed upon expectations; the effectiveness of particular methods in constructing identified collaborative planning outcomes, products, and solutions; and strengthening long-term collaborative capacities within organizations and the community.