

A Solid Foundation for Collaborative Conservation

Gary Severson, 2021

Most citizen based collaborative conservation groups are organic in their origins. Unlike federal advisory committees that are planned, organized, approved, and managed by agencies of the federal government, or advisory councils appointed by state governors, legislatures, or county commissioners, citizen based groups occur naturally in response to shared needs. Citizen collaborative conservation groups grow from the grassroots, populated by individuals who have an interest and stake in a particular geographic area. People in these groups have a deep and sincere social, economic, and/or environmental concern about their community, watershed, forest, or rangeland. They are willing to commit personal time, energy, and resources to improve and maintain desired and healthy conditions of those lands and resources. They have discovered there are others that share similar concerns who are willing to work together to try to make a positive difference. It is truly the American grassroots tradition of neighbors helping neighbors.

As citizen based collaborative conservation groups have proliferated across the landscape over the past two decades, some have thrived and accomplished many things, while others have struggled and become frustrated with little to show for their efforts. Still other collaborative conservation groups have had great achievement in the past but find themselves in a malaise with vague focus and little current progress.

Diagnostic assessments of these groups reveal many things about them. One of the primary reasons some collaborative conservation groups achieve much, while others have difficulty getting to first base, is the foundation each group has built for itself. When people come together to address common concerns, it is natural to jump right in trying to solve problems. Developing organizational structure is viewed by numerous action-oriented people as a distraction, or worse a total waste of time. However, experience has shown that groups that take time to build a solid foundation are able to accomplish more and are more enduring than those who do not.

Like any solid foundation, it is constructed of building materials designed for the job. In building a solid foundation for a collaborative conservation group there are at least four primary building blocks. For ease of memory there is an alliteration known as the 4-Ps developed by the USDA Forest Service National Collaboration Cadre: Purpose, People, Process, and Product.

Purpose – This is the cornerstone for the foundation of a collaborative conservation group. A builder's cornerstone is the first stone laid and sets the orientation of a building in a specific direction. Like the builder's cornerstone the agreed upon purpose of a collaborative conservation group is the first step a group should undertake because it will establish the

orientation and direction of the group. The development of the purpose cannot be over emphasized because everything the group does begins and ends with the purpose, and all the other building blocks relate to it. In addition, the purpose establishes the standard by which progress of the group will be measured.



Considerations regarding Purpose:

- The purpose should be specific, straightforward, concise, and succinct.
- The purpose should not be ambiguous and vague.
- Avoid trying to be all things to all people.
- The purpose should communicate who you are, the geographic and topical areas of focus, and what you intend to accomplish. Think of it as your calling card.

People – The purpose is comprised of words, but it needs people to make it come to life. Who are the people who have a stake and interest in the purpose sufficient for them to commit their time, energy, and resources? Who are the people with the appropriate skills and experiences that can bring them to bear on the purpose? Who are the people who can work with others,



even those with differing perspectives? Who are the people with leadership skills that can mold a group of individuals into a functioning organization?

Collaborative conservation groups are in it for the long haul and their efforts transcend individual projects and time. Turnover of those involved in collaborative conservation efforts will occur as personal and

professional circumstances change. Make sure that the breadth of interests and perspectives in the group remain broad. Never stop telling others about your purpose, your group, and your accomplishments. Never stop inviting new people to join you in your efforts.

Considerations regarding People:

- Avoid becoming monolithic by populating the group with only like-minded people.
- Diversity in experiences, skills, interests, and demographics will give the group a broader perspective in addressing the purpose by developing alternative approaches.
- Make on-purpose time to build and strengthen personal relationships among those participating - celebrate progress and have some fun.
- Develop a system of succession for group leaders and participants.

Process – When people come together to work toward accomplishing a shared purpose, it pays to have guideposts to help you navigate your way. Process may well be the least favorite foundational building block for some people to spend time developing. However, experience

has proven that the more deliberate the thinking that goes into determining how the group will function, the more progress will be made. Many collaborative conservation groups post their guidance documents on their webpage, and they can be helpful in gaining an understanding of how other groups govern themselves. However, every collaborative conservation group is uniquely different and the process for how the group will govern itself in working together needs to be specific to the people participating.



Considerations regarding Process:

- Keep it simple.
- Keep it fair.
- Keep it open and transparent.
- Keep it rooted in common sense.
- Apply it consistently.
- Evaluate it periodically to make sure it is working for those participating.
- Change it if it needs to be changed.

Product(s) – The fourth building block in the solid foundation of a collaborative conservation group is product(s). What does the collaborative effort produce in the way of tangible



outcomes? Groups need to carefully select the things on which they will focus their efforts. Selected projects need to relate directly to the purpose. More than one collaborative conservation group has faltered because they began focusing on projects and products that were not directly addressing their shared and stated purpose. No matter how good a potential project may be, if it does not clearly address the purpose it may cause a blurred group

focus. This is known as “mission creep” and it often causes collaborative conservation groups to lose focus, become confused, and thwart their purpose.

Considerations regarding Product(s):

- Strive to maintain alignment between the things on which the group expends time, energy, and resources and the shared and stated purpose.
- Beware not to generate “collaboration fatigue” by overextending the group’s capacity.
- Select projects and their resulting products that are realistic and achievable within the group’s capacity and the context of conditions.
- Identify metrics by which you will be able to measure progress as the group pursues the product(s).
- Periodically assess the progress toward achieving the product(s) that address the purpose.

The 4-Ps provide a framework for building a solid foundation for the organization and operation of a collaborative conservation group. The 4-Ps are only a framework and the actual development of Purpose, Process, People, and Product, is uniquely specific to the group to which they apply. No two collaborative conservation groups are the same, so avoid the temptation of simply adopting the foundational guidance of another group as your own. There is immense value in your group going through the 4-Ps development process, it will provide ownership to the participants and it will pay dividends in the long run.

Gary Severson is an original member of the USDA Forest Service National Collaboration Cadre. He has worked with more than forty national forests and their community collaborative partners and served on the USDA Secretary's National Advisory Committee for Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration. He is a co-founder and former chair of the Colorado Bark Beetle Cooperative and is the retired Executive Director of Northwest Colorado Council of Governments. He makes his home in Evergreen, Colorado.