

To: File
 Date: June 22, 2008
 Subject: **Why large group processes go badly in environmental and public policy facilitations**

This is a list of causes/triggers for large group failure or problems was developed in a web survey of group facilitators in April-May 2008. To get the input, experienced facilitators across the country were asked to fill out a web survey about “why things go badly in large group” processes. These facilitators specialized in environmental and public policy facilitation.

Joe McMahon compiled the comments. At the Environmental Conflict Resolution 2008 Conference in Tucson in May 2008, Joe McMahon of Collaborative Processes and Chris Moore of CDR Associates facilitated large and small group processes about this topic. We asked the group to tell us: Is this list of triggers for large group problems accurate and complete? They added a few topics. We asked individual to indicate which triggers occur most frequently in their experience. A ✓ is inserted where many facilitators participating in the discussion supported this concept as a common problem for large groups facilitations. Although informal, the results are interesting.

My summary of what we learned - What are the most common triggers for group failures?

Parties

1. Polarized parties, often with a long conflict history.
2. Lack of collaborative leadership or direction.
3. Dysfunctional parties.
4. Parties who seek to undermine the process.
5. Low disclosure by some participants, hidden agendas.

Process

6. The process pace is wrong; time too short for complex issues.
7. Problems with the decisional process or lack of clarity about desired outcome.
8. Unrealistic expectations (outcome and pace).
9. External pressure (from senior management or politics).
10. Lack of credible expertise to assess data.

Web survey results and participant comments

What are the triggers of things going badly?

- Process Pace
 - Limited time and complex issues, deadlines ✓✓✓
 - Rush to reach solutions ✓
- Stakeholder attitudes
 - Stereotyping, world view scorn
 - Polarization (often long history) ✓✓✓✓✓
 - Inflexibility
 - Unrealistic expectations (outcome and pace) ✓✓
 - Competition (political, institutional, BATNAs)
 - Cultural arrogance

Polarization insights mentioned in the session

- Find someone who can influence extremist leaders
- Make an assessment in advance of parties' incentives to talk/settle.
- High level commitment of decision makers to support the process
- Educate parties about what is possible
- Get message out on data
- Getting parties to work with one voice

What are the triggers of things going badly? (cont'd_

- Process triggers for problems
 - Unclear or confusing goals of convenor ✓
 - Perceived lack of independence of facilitators
 - Poor agenda, lack of rules (or enforcement)
 - Problems with decisional process ✓✓✓
- Difficult or dysfunctional Party(ies) ✓
 - Lack of leadership or direction ✓✓✓
 - Agency dysfunction or low function ✓
 - Staff/representational changes ✓
 - Party lacks needed resources
 - Inter-agency conflict
 - Control, ego, even bullying ✓
 - Low disclosure, hidden agenda ✓✓
 - Poor communication ✓✓
 - Intent to undermine or manipulate the process ✓✓
 - Deep seated mistrust of government
- Behaviors (to extent not mentioned above)
 - Resistance to facilitator and commonly accepted best practices
 - Rush to reach solutions ✓
- Data problems
 - Problems with data and how to assess the data
 - Unexpected results
 - Scientific confusion ✓
 - Lack of credible expertise to assess the data ✓
- External triggers for problems
 - Pressure from senior personnel or external politics ✓✓
 - Parallel political or legal efforts

External factors insights mentioned in the session:

- Do a good assessment of political parties and potential dynamics
- Make the parties' BATNAs transparent and use approaches other than negotiation

What can be done when things go badly?

- Focus on the positive
- Build a sense of group accountability
- Coaching/capacity building for challenging parties
- Abide by/enforce protocols
- Transparency
- “Plug away”
- Put the problem to the group, using the group not facilitator to enforce
- Change the process in some way (such as go to a fishbowl process)
- Coach agency leaders and get assurances (but some commentators say that assurances did not work)
- Change to more senior facilitator/mediator
- Coach leaders in advance and get assurances (but some say this did not help)
- Commitment by convenor to remove those who do not cooperate
- Senior commitment to the process and what confirm want the leaders really ✓
- Early and clear goals about the process

What could have prevented the problems? (cont'd)

- Solid group agreements
- Value diversity
- Don't invite those who are known to be undermining the process
- Early field trip (unites the group)
- Government agencies must be open to change
- More informed and candid situation assessments
- Begin the process with low risk issues

Participant comments during the Tucson session

Participant comments on how to deal with dysfunctional parties

- What people see in dysfunctional parties:
 - They go behind the people in the room; outside politics or actions
 - They say “yes” in the room but then have a veto by senior officials.
- There are disruptive or emotional person
 - They may need coaching
 - There may need to be some self policing
 - Revisit the ground rules to remind them
 - Validate their concerns and find out the triggers
 - To prevent, establish relations outside of the group

Participant comments on lack of leadership in these processes

- Often a lack of agency or institutional goals (so have a side bar with them)
- If the lack of leadership is bad, you may need to stop the process
- 11th hour changes in personnel (so need to brief the new people)
- How to address the lack of leadership?
 - What is leadership? Vision, will take risk and will do the right thing (but this varies with context)
 - Create “space” for leadership
 - If there is no leadership or risk taking, perhaps the process is wrong

Participant comments on people who manipulate the process

- Bad faith may present!
- What should a facilitator do if a party undermines the process?
- There is often a problem with rumors

Participant comments on pace of processes

- Set proper expectations
- Ask stakeholders what works for them
- Do a lot of preparatory work