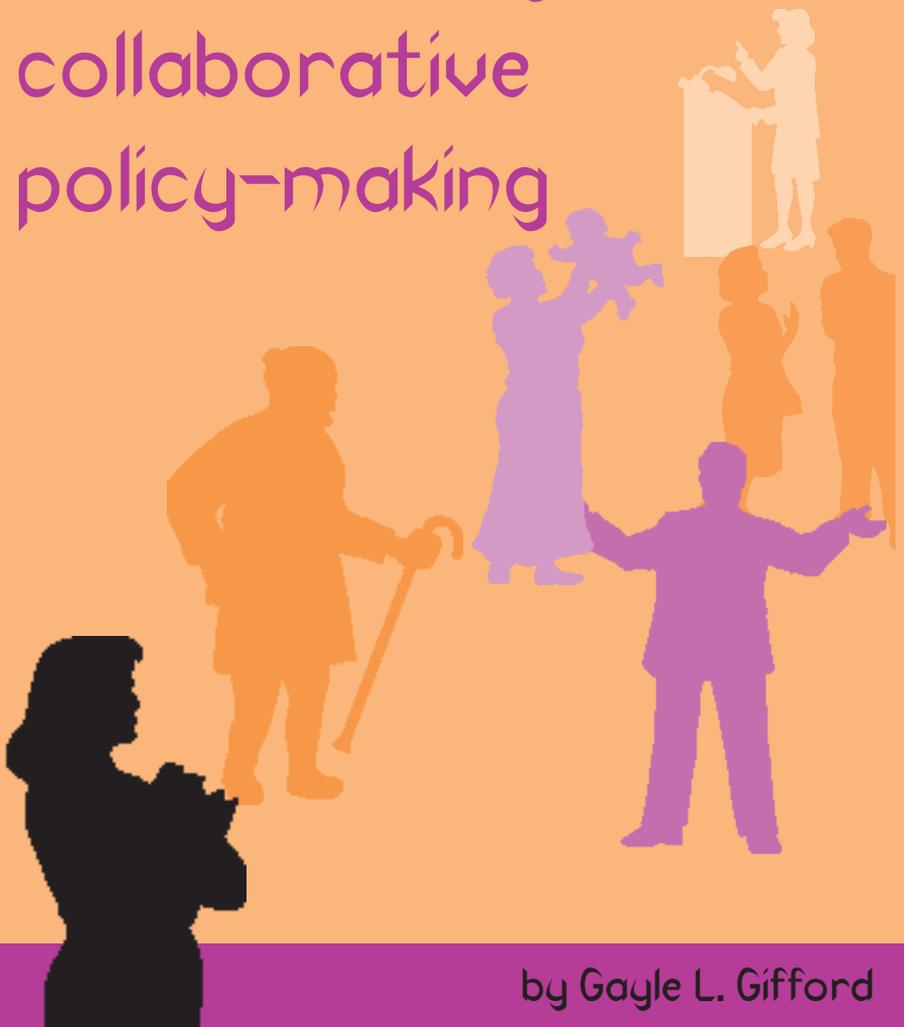


# Meaningful Participation

An activist's guide to  
collaborative  
policy-making



by Gayle L. Gifford

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## Preface

This handbook is for organizers and activists.

My own activism was born in the adversarial arena of the 1960s and '70s, where citizens and their interest groups had few options to influence public policy. We could lobby. We could vote. We could run for office. Or we could take action outside the electoral system through demonstrations, peaceful witness or nonviolent direct action.

When I went to work for a grassroots environmental organization in 1990, I discovered that my vision of action was limited, that there were many other ways for interest groups to have significant influence on their government.

This non-governmental organization (NGO) was extremely effective influencing local decision-making. Though legislative lobbying was important, it wasn't enough. Policy-making frequently took place in the nooks and crannies of government - during routine interaction with administrators, at public hearings, while writing regulations and in their implementation. Techniques of influence included informal dialogue, watchdogging regulators, issuing special reports, and engaging local bodies like zoning boards.

After more than 20 years of activism, I realize that effective citizen action requires us to carry two sets of tools in

our change toolbox –cooperation and confrontation. Fortunately, more and more, government agencies and private industry are participating in collaborative policy making. There are also a growing number of professionals in the field known as public participation. Most professionals are hired as employees or consultants to government or private industry. They spend countless hours training their clients or facilitating and designing public participation processes.

*But who is training the public in public participation?*

Where do we, as citizens and as staff and volunteers of NGOs, learn to engage in meaningful collaboration?

By including the public in meaningful deliberation, our communities can create better public policy. But to do this, all parties need to share the skills of collaboration. This handbook is designed to begin that process, to help balance the power relationships in public participation and to provide activists with a framework to reflect on their work.

It would be very difficult to write a handbook that anticipated every situation that might arise in a multi-party collaboration. Instead, I approached this work from the framework of modern complexity theory. By recognizing and understanding a few basic patterns that underlie our behavior, we can gain the insight we need to make ongoing adaptations to changing situations.

This handbook is a continuing work, a first draft in our life's work to create better, more humane, sustainable public policy.

You will write the next chapters. I welcome your feedback.

Gayle L. Gifford

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without Antioch New England Graduate School, this handbook would never have come into being. Thanks go to faculty members Marsha Greenberg, Steve Guerriero and Robert Goddard; to my friends and fellow students Bob, Ellen, Jack, Jeanne, Sue, Joanne, and Jeri; and a special thank you to Tom Webler in the Department of Environmental Studies, for his enthusiasm for me and this project and for his reflection and expertise on this discipline.

The frameworks developed by other public participation professionals and theorists provided critical background for the creation of this handbook, including works by James Creighton, Bojinka Bishop, David D. Chrislip and Carl E. Larson, Barbara Gray, Annemarie and Hans Bleiker, and the International Association of Public Participation.

This book was also influenced by the organizing perspective of Saul Alinsky, the change writings of Will McWhinney, feedback from environmental advocates and public participation theorists, and reflection on my own experience as an activist.

I owe a great deal of thanks to the individuals who reviewed and commented truthfully on this work, and for whose life experience I am deeply grateful: Tom Webler of Antioch; Wenley Ferguson and H. Curtis Spalding of Save The Bay; Donald Strait of the Connecticut Fund for the Environment; Eugenia Marks of the Audubon Society of Rhode Island; Bojinka Bishop, for both her work and her comments; and Alison Walsh (and anonymous reviewers) at the Environmental Protection Agency, Region 1.

I'd like to thank my mentors who taught me how to organize: Sidney Peck, Robert J. S. Ross, Carol Bragg and Jerry Elmer.

My love and thanks to my family: my children, Emma, Alexander and Samuel Howard, for their independence; my mother Elsie Forster for instilling in me the belief in a better world and for those mysterious maternal genes which have never allowed me to remain silent in the face of injustice; and my husband and colleague, Jonathan W. Howard, for his support, critical perspective, design and production.

Finally, thank you to the men and women I have known both inside and outside of government and to the countless others who have traveled with and before me on this Renaissance path to social justice.

# How to use this handbook

## Chapter 1

The adversarial model of policy-making -- where some interests win and some lose -- has stopped many a bad decision and a number of good ones. Yet, who really wins if a controversial ruling leaves a community divided and bitter? Costly legal battles often follow controversy, consuming precious human and financial resources.

Across the country and around the world, government officials and even private businesses are exploring ways to engage both supporters and critics. They are flocking to a new policy-making approach called *citizen engagement* or *public participation*.

Workshops and handbooks have been written to train professionals in public participation. Consultants are advising business and government.

This handbook is designed for the public, or at least that segment of the public which engages in policy-making as volunteers or staff of non-

governmental organizations. It may also be of value to individual citizens acting alone, although these unaffiliated individuals are not the primary audience.

This handbook does not teach how to organize. It does not discuss media campaigns or the best lobbying techniques. It does not seek to provide an answer to every situation which might arise.

Instead, it outlines a few basic principles which underlie effective public participation. With these tools, you will be able to recognize and advocate for meaningful engagement. If you are already experienced in collaborative policy-making, this handbook can serve as a vehicle for reflection on your current practice.

In the handbook, you'll find a few useful "process" tools to improve your participation. You'll also find questions to help you negotiate the thorny spaces of when to collaborate and when not.

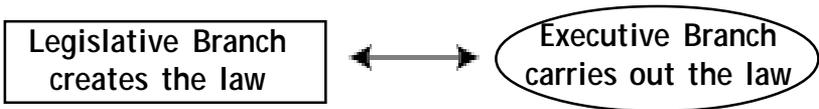
Underlying this handbook is a belief that if you have a better understanding of the principles of collaborative policy-making, you'll be more effective and able to adapt more rapidly to changing situations. Its goal is to help you become an equal partner with government and business in creating a meaningful process of public deliberation — to which we all aspire.

# The basics - why voting isn't enough

## Chapter 2

Although this section will seem elementary to most activists, it is worth restating some basic principles of our democracy.

We are a country built on law. These laws are created by legislators, signed by the chief executive and then implemented by the agencies of the executive branch.



Citizens have two primary ways of influencing the creation of those laws.\* First, they vote for the candidates who best reflect their points of view. Secondly, they tell elected officials through lobbying – acting as individuals or through interest groups

what laws they need and how to vote. Both voting and lobbying are essential roles of a responsible citizenry in this democracy.

Once laws are passed, most citizens assume their job has ended and that legislation will adequately protect their concerns.

Yet there is wide room for interpretation in the enactment of law.

- Agencies must design regulations to guide the implementation of the law.
- Agencies may fail to enforce existing regulations.
- Agencies may make exceptions to regulations.
- Laws may impact the lives of individuals who don't vote in that district, lack voting privileges or voted with the minority.

***In fact, an awful lot of policy-making that affects us does not directly involve legislation:***

- A private school receives a zoning variance to construct a new multi-towered dormitory in a residential community.
- A new highway will pass through a rural part of town.

\*Of course, there is a third branch of government, the judiciary, which interprets the meanings of laws and upholds or invalidates them. While it plays a major role in policy-making, this handbook focuses on ways to affect the legislative and executive branches before seeking relief through the courts.

- The health department is proposing new regulations for uninsured patients.
- A school district is developing curriculum for non-English speaking students.

Throughout, government officials are expected to make decisions which represent the *best interests* of the public. But which public's interest?

**We often have different interests.**

Interests are shaped by the unique circumstances of your life, including:

- *where you live and work*
- *your current family situation*
- *your income, education, class, gender, race and ethnicity*
- *your scientific, spiritual and political beliefs*

Given this diversity, it seems unreasonable to expect that government officials can possibly know all of the ways that their policies will affect individual lives. As a result, you may find that your interests have not been adequately represented when a final decision is made.

You can see that in this complex and rapidly changing world, voting isn't enough. You also need to influence decisions that are made outside the ballot box. This handbook is designed to help you do that better.

# Two ways to make policy

## Chapter 3

Policy-making usually happens in one of the following ways (Gray 1989):

### **Adversarial**

Many of us are experienced in the adversarial process of policy-making. An action is proposed. Every interest lobbies decision-makers for their position. Whoever has the most power wins (see page 25). The aggrieved parties try to stop or reverse the decision through a lawsuit or new legislation.

### **Collaborative**

In this approach, diverse interests work together to find common ground. The decision-maker recognizes that it does not have all the answers but needs to involve responsible citizens and interest groups to help find better, more lasting solutions to community problems. Here, interests are engaged in meaningful consultation and may even be asked to participate directly in decision-making.

Although we have less experience with collaborative policy-making, government agencies from the local to the national level are beginning to recognize the value of citizen input and collaboration. Interest and consumer groups are demanding that they be treated (in the best case) as full partners and at least consulted before major policy decisions are made.

Today, environmental leaders serve on federal commissions. Health consumers are invited to participate in designing new regulations. Even many large corporations have created citizen-advisory committees to guide decision-making.

As an activist, participatory policy-making may be a dream come true. But how do you recognize the real thing from half-hearted or even phony efforts designed to claim that the public was consulted? And if the ideal of collaboration hasn't reached your local officials yet, how can you assure that your interests will be heard and considered before decisions are made?

**Public Participation** is the emerging practice of engaging constituencies in collaborative policy-making. By understanding what is involved in public participation, you can begin to create a process toward meaningful participation.

## So what is Public Participation?

Let's start with a definition:

### ***Public participation***

- ◆ is the active involvement of informed citizens in government decision-making outside the ballot box,
- ◆ ensuring that citizen needs, concerns and values are represented in policy and action.

*In other words, public participation is a way for citizens to purposefully influence the ongoing rules and decisions of government.*

Public participation is based on the belief that when informed citizens influence the decisions which affect their lives, communities can make better public policy which has widespread and lasting support.

Public Participation is also known by other names:

- ◆ *Citizen involvement*
- ◆ *Multi-party collaboration*
- ◆ *Citizen engagement*
- ◆ *Stakeholder engagement*
- ◆ *Consumer involvement*
- ◆ *Consumer engagement*
- ◆ *Community-based problem solving*

# What makes public participation meaningful?

A genuine public participation program embodies these values:

## Fair

Acknowledges biases and works to create a level playing field

## Open

Creates accessible and public processes for information-sharing and deliberation

## Truthful

Promotes accuracy and authenticity in fact and spirit

## Competent

Results in better decisions



## Broad-based

Represents the diversity of interests

## Responsive

Considers and is influenced by contributions of participants

## Deliberative

Provides enough time for contemplation and thoughtful response to a variety of perspectives

## More standards of public participation

The International Association for Public Participation, known as IAP2, promotes the ethical practice of public participation among its members, who include individuals from government, private consulting firms, academia and non-governmental organizations.

IAP2 has developed a set of core values of public participation for its members. You may want to share these core values with your local officials.

## IAP2 CORE VALUES OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

- ★ The public should have a say in the decisions about actions which affect their lives.
- ★ Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
- ★ The public participation process communicates the interests and meets the needs of all participants.
- ★ The public participation process seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected.
- ★ The public participation process involves participants in defining how they participate.
- ★ The public participation process provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
- ★ The public participation process communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

*Reprinted with permission of  
International Association for Public Participation*

# Who has a stake?

## Chapter 4

The term **stakeholder** is used to describe the people and organizations who will be affected by a decision. Public participation programs are designed to involve these stakeholders.

In order to have influence in collaborative policy-making, you need to establish your position as a stakeholder.

You are a **stakeholder**  
if...  
you stand to **gain** or **lose**  
by the decision or action

## You stand to gain or lose when:

- ◆ Your health, safety or quality of life is involved.
- ◆ Your livelihood is affected.
- ◆ Your community will change.
- ◆ Your use of an area will change.
- ◆ Your future will be different.
- ◆ Something of value — tangible or intangible — will change.

It is important to know the interests and positions of the other stakeholders who will be affected by a decision. You'll find yourself aligned or opposed to different stakeholders as you attempt to influence policy.

You can identify the other stakeholders by answering these questions:

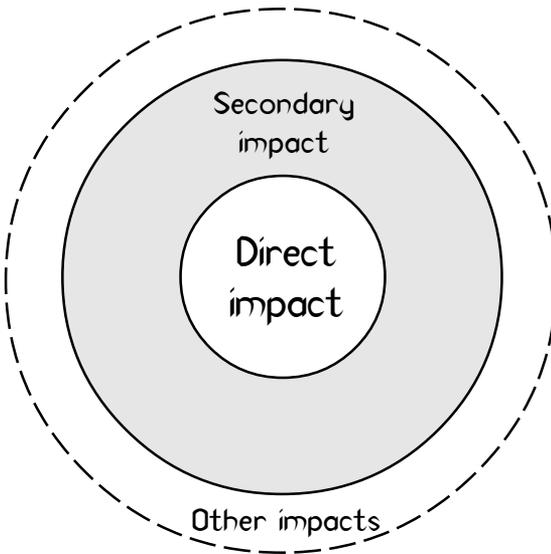
- ✓ Who else will gain or lose by this action?
  - What do they gain?
  - What would they lose?
  - How powerful are they?
  - Are they potential allies?
- ✓ Who has knowledge or skills to help find the best solutions to this problem?
- ✓ Who has the power or resources to block or implement the final decision?

- ✓ How sympathetic are these stakeholders to your interests?

Different stakeholders may have varying levels of power in their ability to influence decisions. You'll find more about power in the next chapter.

When agencies consider whom to consult, they sometimes view stakeholder interests in a series of

concentric circles based on the degree to which they are affected by a decision.



**Inner circle:** stakeholders most directly affected by the problem, e.g. consumers of a service or neighbors in the path of a new development.

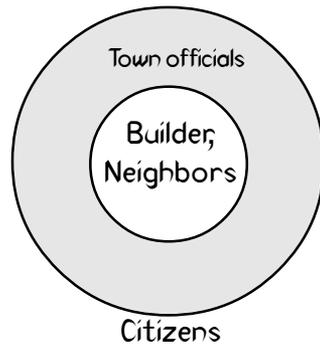
**Middle circle:** stakeholders who are secondarily affected or may have the final say in the decision; e.g Chamber of Commerce or legislators asked to approve a bond issue

**Outer circle:** general public.

Often, stakeholders in the innermost circle will be more actively consulted than stakeholders in the outer circles. It is to your advantage to be considered a stakeholder in the inner circle.

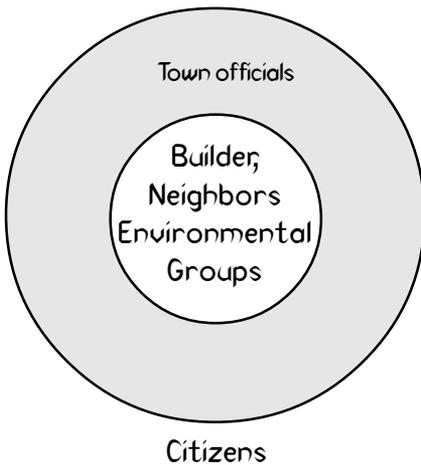
Stakeholders perceived to be in the middle and outer rings still may have a substantial amount of power over the final decision. They can serve as allies or opponents to decisions created by the inner ring of stakeholders.

Here's an example of how this works. A national corporation wants to build a new retail store near a residential neighborhood. The *inner circle* might contain the owners of the company as well as the immediate neighbors represented by a neighborhood association. The *middle circle* could include technical consultants like the town planner or traffic engineer or members of the city council. The *outer circle* might include other citizens of your town who would like to



shop at the store or who would benefit from new jobs and taxes.

But consider the issue again. Other interests may also be at stake. For example, the land on which the company is planning to build is important habitat for a state endangered species. Now, both state and national environmental interests consider themselves stakeholders in the inner circle.



Because the level of impact isn't always so clear, and because stakeholders frequently change over time, you'll need to constantly reevaluate the interests and power of the other stakeholders.

**Remember:**  
Stakeholders may  
change over time

# How does power affect public participation?

## Chapter 5

Your ability to be an effective participant in government decision-making is a function of your *power*. You need power in order to be recognized as a legitimate stakeholder and also to influence how decisions will be made.

### There are many kinds of power

Too often, power is seen as negative or monolithic. Yet there are many types and sources of power. Here are eight types of power to consider :

#### Authority

This power comes from the rights society bestows on an individual through a formal position. For example, legislators have authority to make laws, judges to make legal decisions, government agencies to enforce regulations.

(from: *Reframing Organizations*, Bolman and Deal, Copyright (c) 1997 by Jossey-Bass, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Jossey-Bass, Inc. a subsidiary of John Wiley and Sons, Inc.)

## Information and expertise

Those holding information, skills or knowledge about a particular situation or issue are very powerful. This is one reason why scientists or experts often have a great deal of influence over government decision-making.

## Rewards

Stakeholders who can deliver rewards like votes or money can be extremely powerful. Although charitable tax-exempt organizations are prohibited from engaging in *political activity*, they can lobby, educate and mobilize citizens around issues.\*

## Coercion

This power rests on the ability to block, force, or punish. Government can apply force through the police or military. Activists have used boycotts, strikes, lawsuits or even media exposure.

## Alliances and networks

Strong relationships and networks can help you build your other sources of power. A coalition of stakeholders increases your ability to deliver rewards. A national partner might provide you with important expertise.

\* Tax-exempt organizations should consult IRS regulations for restrictions on lobbying and political activity.

## Access and agendas

Whoever influences or controls the decision-making process determines who gets consulted and what issues are discussed. Not only do you need to be recognized as an inner-circle stakeholder (see page 19), but you also need to influence which issues will be discussed and how decisions will be made (see page 35).

## Framing

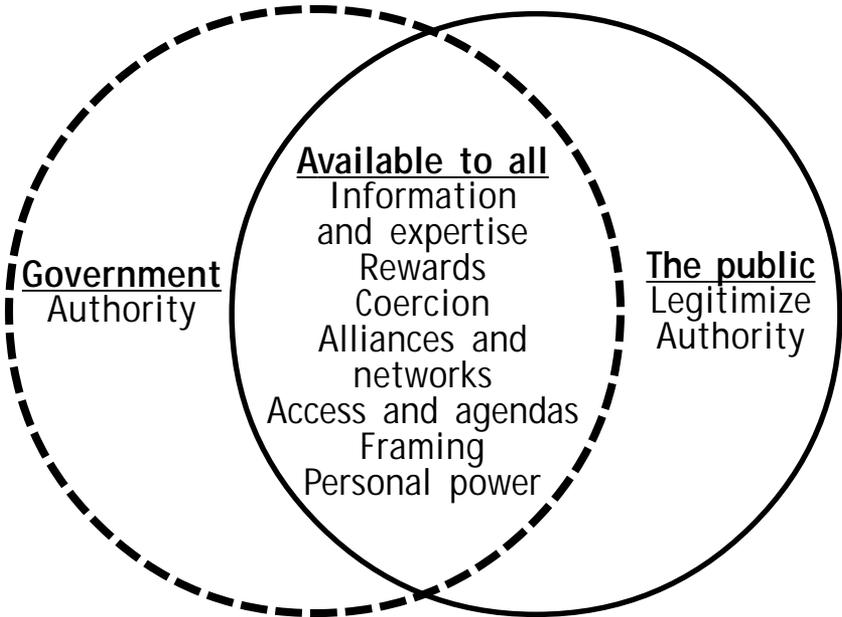
Because words and symbols can have powerful meanings, whoever shapes the public debate can have a subtle to substantial influence on its outcome. One of the most hotly contested issues of our time, abortion, centers on a public battle for meaning: are you pro-choice or pro-life? is this a fetus or an unborn child?

## Personal power

Certain individuals seem to have influence far greater than the strength of their other sources of power. Charisma, passion, articulation and dogged determination can produce their own special brand of power.

# Mobilize your most effective power

Don't assume that government decision-makers have the greatest power. As this diagram shows, there are many sources of power available to activists and organizers.



While all sources of power are important, you'll find that you may have need for different types of power depending on how the decision will be made.

# Adversarial decision-making

Your primary goal in this type of process is to amass enough power to win. Decision-makers will assess your ability to deliver *rewards*, either alone or through *alliances and networks*, and the strength of your *coercive power* to stop a decision, whether in court, with a higher level decision-maker or through other means such as boycotts. *Framing* the meaning of the debate can be very important to building your base of support.

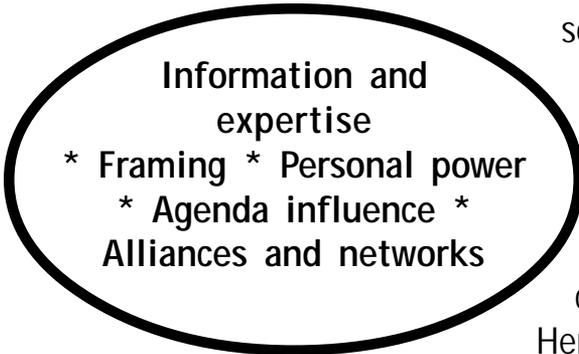
Another approach to adversarial decision-making is to use your power to *gain influence over the agenda*; that is, to force a change from an adversarial to a collaborative process.

- 
- Rewards \* Framing**
  - \* Agenda control**
  - \* Alliances and Networks**
  - \* Coercive**

# Collaborative decision-making

You may need your strongest sources of power just to gain *access* to a collaborative process. Once collaboration begins,

however, other sources of power may become more valuable to the deliberation which is a hallmark of collaboration.



Here, *information and expertise, framing,*

*personal power, agenda influence, and alliances and networks* become critically important.

Because the practice of collaborative policy-making is still imperfect, you will always need to maintain your power to deliver *rewards* or to use *coercion*. Decision-making may shift from adversarial to collaborative and sometimes back again to adversarial. Other forces may intervene to disrupt a collaboration. To prepare for these shifts, be sure that you are ready to deploy the power you need.

# Communicating to find common ground

## Chapter 6

Good communication is essential for meaningful participation. Two types of communication – **information sharing** and **deliberation** – have different purposes.

Understanding the differences between these two types of communication can help you participate fully and responsibly in collaborative policy-making.

The goal of *information sharing* is to receive or exchange data. You'll need information about science, laws, regulations, positions, and interests. This can be done face to face or through other media.

The purpose of *deliberation* is to bring stakeholders and decision-makers together in purposeful conversation leading to decisions. One type of deliberation, *dialogue*, helps participants develop shared understanding and find common ground (Bohm, 1994). Dialogue usually requires longer, face-to-face conversations, although dialogue is now taking place over the Internet.

Another type of deliberation, *discussion*, is used to make final decisions.

Below are common communications tools used by policy makers in public participation. They are listed in the box below by how well-suited they are for each of these two purposes of communications.

	<b>Information Sharing</b>	<b>Deliberation</b>
Public hearings	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Surveys and polls	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Focus groups	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Advisory forums	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Task forces	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
One-on-one conversation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
House meetings	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Open houses	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Search conferences	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Lobbying	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Newsletters, brochures	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Web sites	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Internet discussions	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Study circles	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

## Use the Seven Principles of Authentic Communication©

To improve communications and build trust, participants need well-honed skills. Public participation expert Bojinka Bishop believes that all participants should be trained to improve their effectiveness. She recommends that good communications embody the seven principles listed below.\*

1. Communicate **fundamental** facts and issues, not peripheral ones.
2. Information must be **relevant** to the people with whom you are communicating.
3. Maintain **consistency** between your (or your organization's) actions and words.
4. Be **truthful** and accurate in the information you provide.
5. Information and individuals should be **accessible**. Information should be easy to get and people easy to approach.
6. Language should be **clear** and understandable.
7. Be **compassionate** [empathetic] for other's feelings, circumstances and needs.

You can use these seven principles as ground rules (see page 36) to guide your communications and also ask that the communications of other stakeholders and decision-makers meet these tests. Good communications also help to build trust, an important component of any collaboration.

\*(reprinted with permission of Bojinka Bishop).

## Focus on the issues, not the personalities.

It is sometimes easy to forget that there are real human beings beneath those opposing positions. It is very easy to see your opponents as bad people. But you diminish your personal power if you treat others with a lack of respect.

Your feelings are real and so are the emotions of the other stakeholders. Resist the temptation to engage in name calling. You will be more effective by focusing your passion on the issues, not the personalities involved. Relationships matter and help build powerful alliances and networks. You never know when an adversary might become an ally.

# How to create collaborative solutions

## Chapter 7

Just about every attempt to solve a problem involves the six steps and two principles listed on the next page. Policy-makers go through these stages, with you or without you.

Sometimes steps are shortened; sometimes they are skipped all together. Devoting attention to all six steps helps create better solutions.

Whether you are consulted informally or through a formal stakeholder council, you'll improve the likelihood of better decision-making if you can contribute your perspective at each of these stages.

On the next few pages, you'll find more information and tools to help you understand and participate in each stage of problem-solving.

# 6 Steps

## to Better Problem Solving

1. Identify the stakeholders and their interests
2. Understand and agree on how decisions will be made
3. Develop a common definition of the problem and research its causes
4. Generate lots of creative alternative solutions
5. Find and commit to the best solution
6. Work together to implement, evaluate and refine the solution

## 2 Principles which apply to all six steps:

- 1. Seek out information and data
- 2. Test your assumptions broadly

## Step 1. Identify the stakeholders and their interests

You learned earlier that you'll need to analyze the other stakeholders and their sources of power. Make sure that your organization (or your interest) is understood to be a stakeholder. If it's not, you'll need to lobby for a "seat at the table."

Try to understand the *interests* of the other stakeholders rather than just their *positions*. Satisfying interests rather than positions is critical to finding common ground among diverse stakeholders.

*Positions* are proposed actions or solutions. *Interests* are the values behind those positions: our needs, desires, concerns and fears. (Fisher, 1981)

### Example:

**Position:** Don't site the landfill in our neighborhood.

**Interest:** We want to protect our property values and our health.

Be very clear about your own interests. Write them down. By remaining true to your interests, you can modify your position without violating your core values.

## Step 2. Understand and agree on how decisions will be made.

At the very start, demand that decision-makers are clear about how final decisions will be made. If what's proposed does not embody the core values of public participation (see page 15), then you need to use your power to create a more meaningful process.

Here are some questions to ask.

### Leadership

- \_\_\_ Who is responsible for assuring collaboration? Do they have the power to do this?
- \_\_\_ Who will provide the resources needed to ensure citizen participation and good problem-solving?
- \_\_\_ If there will be meetings, would a neutral facilitator improve discussion?

### Time and Place

- ✓ What is the timeline for making the final decision?
- ✓ How frequently will you be consulted? Where?
- ✓ If the stakeholders will meet, how often? Where?

## Ground rules

- What opportunities have been designed for meaningful input?
- Will there be a formal or informal stakeholder process?
- What is being done to create a safe space for productive deliberation?
- Will the principles of Authentic Communications be followed (page 30)?

## Decision Rules

- Who will make the final decision? What is their authority?
- How will the decision be made?
- If a formal stakeholder committee is established, will it make decisions by unanimous consent or by majority vote?
- How much will its recommendation affect the final decision?

## Step 3. Develop a common definition of the problem and research its causes

The way that a problem is initially defined greatly affects your ability to find mutually agreeable solutions. Don't be trapped by problem definitions that already imply causes or solutions.

### How to define a problem

State the difference between what is and what you'd like it to be. Don't imply causes or solutions. For example: "*which national test should students be required to take?*" assumes that a test is the solution to student assessment. A better problem statement is "*how do we best measure student performance to improve outcomes?*"

## Understand root causes to develop better solutions

By researching the causes of a problem, you may discover unexpected issues or gain insight to new solutions. One helpful way to explore root causes is through a tool known as the *Why?Why?* diagram. For each cause that you find, ask and answer *why?* at least two more times.

## For example:

... if you are trying to find solutions to your community's solid waste problem, ask yourself "Why do we have all this trash?"

One answer might be:

"Households generate it."

Why?

Why?

◆ To get rid of things they don't need.

◆ Because there is too much packaging.

Why?

Why?

- ◆ There's no place to store things they don't use.
- ◆ There's no alternative to trash for getting rid of things.
- ◆ It's cheaper to throw something out than fix or reuse it.

- ◆ Because there are no alternative products.
- ◆ Because there are no restrictions on packaging.
- ◆ Because we need to keep products clean.
- ◆ Because packaging is cheap.
- ◆ Because companies use packaging to advertise.

## Step 4. Generate lots of alternative solutions.

Once you've had the opportunity to consider all of the causes of a problem, you can begin to imagine different solutions. The more alternative solutions you can generate, the more likely you are to find one or more solutions that satisfy stakeholder interests.

*Here's one tool to help you generate lots of ideas:*



**Here are the rules:**

### **Develop your own list of solutions ...**

Each stakeholder should develop their own list of possible solutions.

### **Everyone contributes ...**

Compile all proposed solutions and share them with all of the stakeholders. Then, include new solutions generated by the ideas on the first lists.

### **All ideas are encouraged ...**

Absurd or impractical ideas may contain brilliant solutions.

### **No judgments ...**

Save your critique for later or you'll discourage ideas.

### **Quantity counts ...**

The more alternatives, the more opportunity to find the best solution.

## Step 5. Find and commit to the best solution

The goal of a well-designed public participation process is to find the best solutions.

### A good solution:

- reconciles stakeholders' interests
- solves the problem
- avoids unintended consequences

Here are some ways to evaluate solutions.

- **What are the outcomes and implications of the alternatives which have been presented?**

*If we choose this, what will happen? Will it solve the problem? How much will it cost? How easy is it to do? What other impacts might it have?*

- **Will you accept *mitigation*: that is, will you accept some negative impact in return for other benefits?**

*You can site the building here, but only if it is well landscaped, you install more traffic signals and you build our neighborhood a new playground.*

- **Can you combine all or part of different proposals to create a better solution?**

*What if we combine part of Bill's solution with Kathy's?*

- **How well do the proposals satisfy the interests of the stakeholders?**

*Which proposed solutions best satisfy our interests? Which meet the interests of the other stakeholders?*

Use an evaluation matrix to assess alternatives. Create a chart like the one below. List all of the alternatives which are under serious consideration. Rank them from high to low against each interest expressed by the stakeholders. Total the rankings to determine which alternatives best satisfy needs.

**Example:**

Here’s how you might score two alternative development proposals by using a 5-point scale where 5 best meets stakeholder interests and 1 least meets stakeholder interests:

<b><i>Interests</i></b>	<b>Alternative #1</b>	<b>Alternative #2</b>
We can pay for it	3	1
Preserves community character	5	3
Improves economy	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>

Alternative #1 seems to be the better solution. A variation on this approach would apply different weights to the interests.

## Step 6. Work together to implement, evaluate and refine the solution.

Congratulations! if you've found a solution which meets your needs.

Unfortunately, the work isn't over when you agree on a solution. Now you have to implement it.

You may need to work with the other stakeholders to ensure that your decision becomes reality. This is especially important if a higher authority such as a legislature will make the final decision. Working together on implementation is another level of collaboration and may also help to build lasting good will among the stakeholders.

Christopher Gates of the National Civic League suggests that community collaboration should help us find mutually acceptable solutions to the majority of our problems at the local level (Gates, 1998).

Not all problems have solutions that can be embraced by all stakeholders. Turn to page 48 for guidance on what to do when the arrived-at solution is unacceptable to your interests.

## Reminder

Don't forget the two principles throughout each problem-solving step:

→ 1. Seek out information and data

Good decisions require that both stakeholders and decision-makers have access to information and data. This is important at all stages of the process to build mutual understanding and develop better decisions. Seek out the answers to your questions. Look for new approaches in other communities.

→ 2. Broadly test your assumptions

It is also critical to the success of this process that assumptions are confirmed. For example, you might assume that input from stakeholders in one neighborhood applies to all surrounding areas or to all interest groups within that neighborhood. Don't assume, check it out. An erroneous assumption can derail lots of hard work well into the process.

Share information and test assumptions along the way. Demand that decision-makers, stakeholders and the general public are kept informed and have access to information. This will help to surface objections early and build support for final solutions.

# Dealing with science and risk

## Chapter 8

### The role of expert testimony

One of the most difficult barriers for citizen activists in any public participation process is the weight given to *expert* testimony. Experts can be scientists, engineers, accountants or anyone assumed to have particular knowledge about a potential action or solution. Expert testimony often has great influence over the choice of a solution.

It is important to keep in mind that the experts are usually not the decision-makers. Their role is to help you in your deliberations by providing information about root causes or the outcomes of alternative solutions.

### Ways to assess and use expert testimony

- Understand and agree on the method and assumptions to be used in any study.
- Evaluate the credentials of any proposed expert.
- Have experts disclose their affiliations and funders.

- Decide if these affiliations compromise the objectivity of the study.
- Commission your own study.
- Have your technical consultants review their experts' testimony.
- Do not rely on only one source of expertise.

## How to consider risk

Many of the thorniest policy issues involve risk. *What is the risk of the new chemical factory releasing toxins into our air or water? How many people are at risk of serious complications from a new drug?*

You assess and take risks almost every day: driving your car, crossing the street, applying for a new job.

Studies show our perception of risk is directly related to our values (Chess, Hance, Sandman, 1990, as discussed by B. Bishop). For most people, risk is more acceptable when:

- it is controllable
- it is voluntary
- the possibility of human error is low
- its chance of occurring is very improbable
- the consequences are not catastrophic
- it is equally shared
- the source of the information is trusted

Analyzing these factors will help you understand your own sensitivity to risk. You may choose to accept the risk, lobby for ways to reduce it (e.g. more backup systems or safeguards for storage) or decide that the risk is more than you could bear.

## Who bears the burden of proof for risk?

In today's world, we are faced with great uncertainty around the impact of new technologies and activities. The medical study reported today contradicts the one issued last week. Years later we still don't completely know the human and environmental impact of disasters such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill or the nuclear reactor accident at Chernobyl.

Though science may state that the probability of harm is minute or that there is no proven evidence of lasting harm, it doesn't relieve the visceral discomfort and fear that the worst will come to pass.

In the face of this uncertainty, what power do you have to challenge science and control risk?

## The Precautionary Principle

Because it is virtually impossible to prove the absolute absence of harmful effects, a new international standard for dealing with scientific uncertainty is evolving. Still controversial, it is called the *Precautionary Principle*.

The Precautionary Principle recognizes that assessing human and environmental health risks is complex and that science has not adequately

addressed factors such as cumulative impact, low-level adverse effects (Tickner, 1997) or unforeseen consequences.

The Precautionary Principle lends itself to collaborative participation efforts. While there is still much to learn on how to apply this principle, it is a tool worth exploring.

### **Basic tenets of the Precautionary Principle:**

- ❖ When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.
- ❖ In this context, the proponent of the activity, rather than the public, should bear the burden of proof.
- ❖ The process of applying the Precautionary Principle must be open, informed and democratic and must include potentially affected parties.
- ❖ It must also involve an examination of the full range of alternatives, including no action.

(Wingspread Statement on the Precautionary Principle, June 1998)

# When not to collaborate

## Chapter 9

There will be times when you choose not to participate in a collaboration and may even prefer an adversarial process.

- **No access:** If you are locked out of the collaboration and have no meaningful input, then you need to use all of your power to stop the process right away.
- **Legal constraints:** If there are legal or other constraints to decision-making which would prevent careful consideration of all of your concerns, then it is unlikely that you will benefit from a collaboration.
- **Failed collaboration:** If collaboration fails or a collaborative agreement is overruled by higher decision-makers, then you may need to stop an unfavorable decision. This can occur if collaboration cannot reconcile your interest with that of the other stakeholders and the risks are more than you can bear. It frequently is needed when a carefully crafted solution is overturned by a

higher authority like the legislature or a new agency director.

- **Lack of resources:** Collaboration takes time and resources. You need to weigh the resources of your own organization and may limit your involvement to the issues which are most important to you.

## Weighing the benefits and risks of collaborative participation:

Many activists agonize over the decision to join a collaborative process.

Here are some of the **risks** to consider:

- If you do participate, are you bound by the outcome even if it is unfavorable?
- If you do participate and then oppose the outcome, do you lose critical power?
- If you don't participate, do you lose power by allowing the decision-maker to *frame* you as uncooperative?
- If you don't participate, do you lose your only opportunity to have your interests carefully considered?
- If you believe you can win in an adversarial process, then why waste time on a collaborative one?
- If the process is a failure, will you jeopardize future efforts at collaboration?

Here are a few more **benefits** to consider:

- You may gain power by developing important alliances or acquiring critical knowledge which will serve you in the future.
- You may establish your credibility as an inner circle stakeholder on similar issues.
- You may have mitigated the proposal substantially, even if the outcome is not fully satisfying.
- You learn from failures as well as success.
- You have initiated a process of public participation which can act as a foundation for future problem-solving.

Only you have enough knowledge and experience of your particular situation to weigh the risks against the benefits.

# Summary

## Chapter 10

- Public participation is the active involvement of informed citizens in government decision-making outside of the ballot box, ensuring that citizen needs, concerns and values are represented in policy and action.
- Public participation embodies the belief that if citizens influence the decisions which affect their lives, communities can make better policy.
- For public participation to be meaningful, the process must be fair, open, truthful, deliberative, responsive, broad-based and competent.
- Policy-making is usually done in one of two ways: adversarial or collaborative.
- Public participation involves stakeholders, those interested in or affected by a decision. As a stakeholder, you need to clarify your own interests and understand the interests of the other stakeholders.

- Reconcile stakeholder interests, not positions.
- You need to understand and exercise many sources of power in order to influence public participation processes. These sources of power include authority, information and expertise, rewards, coercion, alliances and networks, access and agendas, framing and personal power.
- You should influence each of the six steps and two principles of problem solving to improve collaborative decision-making.
- Public participation communications need to include opportunities for both information sharing and deliberation.
- Science and expertise have great influence on decisions. You need to have input into their selection and analysis.
- The Precautionary Principle may be a useful tool for evaluating and planning for risk. Whenever an activity raises the threat of harm, precautionary measures should be taken. The proponent of an activity should always bear the burden of proof.
- You will need to evaluate what you gain by participating in a collaborative process or whether there is more benefit by remaining apart from the collaboration. There are times when it may be wiser not to participate.
- Never give away your power.

**“Don’t mourn ..., organize!”**  
**Joe Hill**



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## About the author

**Gayle L. Gifford, CFRE** is President of Cause & Effect, Inc., a consulting firm helping non-profit and public sector organizations create strategic change to build a more just and peaceful world.

Gayle has over 20 years of experience in non-profit management, fund raising and program development. She has served as a founder, senior manager, officer, trustee and volunteer at grassroots, regional and national non-profits.

Gayle has been an activist since the early 1970's in women's rights, peace and disarmament, the environment and human rights. She helped to found the RI Chapter of the Mobilization for Survival and Women for a Non-Nuclear Future (now, the RI Mobilization for Peace and Justice). Gayle also was a founding member of the Environmental Federation of New England.

Gayle is a member of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), the International Association of Facilitators and the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP, formerly NSFRE). Gayle serves on the Board of AFP-RI and is a Certified Fund Raising Executive.

Gayle holds a B.A. from Clark University and an M.S. in Management from Antioch New England Graduate School.

Gayle lives in Providence, RI with her husband and partner, Jonathan W. Howard, and their three children.



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