UNDERSTANDING THE SPECTRUM OF COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE PRACTICES

Leaders today increasingly recognize that, if progress is to be made on difficult issues, citizens need to be involved in discussing and/or making decisions on those issues in one way or another. In fact, public leaders need citizens to be engaged, in order to gain legitimacy for policy decisions. And more and more, citizens have come to expect that will be the case.

But how should citizens become involved? A number of options exist. Indeed, there is a whole spectrum of collaborative governance processes that involve bringing people together to discuss or resolve public issues. At one end of the spectrum are processes that simply inform the public. Next are processes that consult the public, followed by those that in some way involve or engage the pubic. At the far end of the spectrum with the most impact are those processes with a goal to collaborate with the public by having them take part in decision making.

Points on the Spectrum

Let's look at the four main points on the spectrum of collaborative governance processes in a bit more detail.

Inform

In information-exchange processes, government leaders or staff members meet with representatives from the private and civic sectors, as well as individual citizens, to give them information or obtain information from them. This approach can be a useful way for leaders to get reactions to proposals, gain insight into the public's viewpoints, and help allay controversies due to misinformation.

Consult

Leaders can use consultative meetings or committees to gain feedback, advice, or input from a broad array of stakeholders. This can be done on a one-time or on-going basis. Consultation provides leaders with a way to gather technical or scientific information for improved decisions. It can also be used to identify data needs and/or policy options. Sponsors can use this approach to stimulate joint thinking, while explicitly reserving their decision-making prerogative.

Engage

The next point on the spectrum is typically called "involvement," but we prefer the term and concept of "engagement." Much window dressing is being done in the name of "public involvement." It is often undertaken by agencies and companies when they have no intention of acting on the results, but want to be able to say that they have listened to or consulted with the public. Of late, "engagement" has become the more popular term among those who advocate for more direct and genuine citizen participation. Engagement implies a more active, intentional partnership between the general public and leaders. The objective is to actively engage citizens in proposing solutions to difficult problems, choosing priorities, or providing feedback. This kind of public participation is more active than information exchange or consultation; however, engagement does not involve sharing decision-making power, as often happens in the collaborative processes discussed below.

In general, the use of public participation processes has grown markedly since the 1960s, when laws began requiring government to ensure "maximum feasible participation." Over time there has been a shift from information exchange to consultation and then to public involvement, and now to processes that focus on engaging citizens through various kinds of dialogue and deliberation. The purposes of this broader public engagement are to enlarge perspectives, opinions, and understandings. Advocates of public engagement emphasize the value of an active partnership between citizens and decision makers. They believe it is worthwhile for citizens—not just experts and politicians—to be actively involved in deliberation over public issues (Lukensmeyer and Torres 2006).

A variety of models have been developed for this kind of citizen engagement. The Deliberative Democracy Consortium has created a matrix of these different methods; they include Study Circles, America Speaks, the Public Conversations Project, National Issues Forums, and others. Each of these models has its own purpose and methodology, and each produces somewhat different results.[3]

[2]This spectrum was developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) and is used with permission.
[3]For more information see www.deliberative-democracy.net.

Collaborate

Collaborative processes—which are the main focus of this *Guide*—seek consensus recommendations from the public or stakeholders and/or invite shared responsibility in decision making as well as in implementation. The development and implementation of the Florida building code described in this chapter's case study is a good illustration of how collaborative decision making can operate alongside traditional democratic processes.

To collaborate means to "co-labor," to work together to achieve common goals. The term is being used more and more frequently as the need for greater teamwork and cooperation to solve today's problems has become evident in business and government. Wikipedia defines collaboration as a word used "abstractly" to apply to all processes wherein people work together. The term is often used indistinguishably from cooperation, coordination, and even communication, but this muddles important distinctions. Arthur Himmelman, one of the first people to describe how collaboration differs from other processes, said, "When organizations (or individuals) collaborate they share risks, responsibilities, and rewards each of which contributes to enhancing each other's capacity to achieve a common purpose" (2002). This requires a different level of effort and engagement that goes beyond what it takes to simply cooperate or coordinate.

No two collaborative processes are exactly alike. Some are short, involving a few meetings during which people work to achieve their objectives and then disband. Others go on for months or years. Increasingly, when issues require an integration of resources and shared decision making and implementation, a collaborative group itself may become the structure or mechanism through which on-going problem solving and implementation occurs. Over the past ten years, we have seen growing use of these sorts of on-going structures—for example, in the form of watershed councils and adaptive management groups.

While this *Guide* focuses on collaborative consensus-building processes, it will also address how and when to link such processes with broader public engagement processes.

The Principles of Collaborative Governance

While each of the processes on the spectrum of collaborative governance is different, all need to be conducted in accord with certain democratic principles. The following are the key principles to keep in mind.

- Transparency and Accountability: Discussions should take place in the public eye. When agreements are reached, mechanisms must exist to ensure that parties follow through on their commitments.
- Equity and Inclusiveness: Diverse interests and all who are needed to work on the issues must be present or represented.
- Effectiveness and Efficiency: Good processes must be designed to produce outcomes that make practical sense.
- Responsiveness: Public concerns need to be authentically addressed.
- Forum Neutrality: The process should be conducted impartially, in an atmosphere in which participants share responsibility for setting ground rules and generating outcomes.
- Consensus-Based Decision Making: This principle applies only to collaborative decision-making processes in which decisions are made through consensus rather than majority rule.

What Consensus Means

Consensus is the desired way of making decisions in collaborative processes. Consensus is different from voting. It involves gaining broad agreement from participants. After all, the purpose of bringing people together in a collaborative process is to gain the widest possible agreement, so that all those involved will carry out the agreement and follow through on their commitments.

Most groups define consensus in a way that acknowledges that participants support the decision, or at least can "live with it," and that implementation can move forward. The following is a standard formulation of consensus:

"The group will make its decisions and recommendations based on the consensus of its members. The group will reach consensus on an issue when it finally agrees upon a single alternative and each member can honestly say:

- I believe that other members understand my point of view,
- I believe I understand other members' points of view, and
- Whether or not I prefer this decision, I support it because it was arrived at openly and fairly and it is the best solution for us at this time."

This definition does not mean unanimity of thought or abandonment of values. Indeed, one of the characteristics of a well-constructed agreement is that it represents diverse values and interests. A consensus agreement is usually a package of small agreements. Participants probably have varying levels of enthusiasm and support for each component, but they can accept the overall package as a course of action.

Majority voting induces a different kind of interaction. During discussions, if participants know they can revert to a majority vote if they cannot agree, they focus more on building coalitions than on trying to meet the needs of all parties. In a consensus process, by contrast, participants must try to educate and persuade one another about their needs and interests, and must listen carefully to determine how a proposed solution can meet the needs of all parties.

In some situations, a broader consensus may need to be formed—i.e., not just with the people around the table, but among constituents who are not at the table. In fact, many people who care about the matter may not be able to participate directly. In these cases, public engagement processes can be useful in informing and consulting the wider public, in order to build broad understanding and acceptance.

Misconceptions about Consensus Processes

The following is a well-stated description of five misconceptions about consensus processes from an article by Larry Dressler.

Misconception #1: Consensus takes too much time. In considering the issue of speed, be sure to ask yourself whether you actually need to decide quickly or implement quickly. Fast decisions made by individuals or through majority voting often result in slower implementation due to resistance or unanticipated consequences. Many leaders who use consensus would say, "Whatever time we lose during our decision-making phase, we gain in the implementation phase." There is no denying that consensus can take more time than other decision processes but it does not need to be a burdensome process. With practice, a well-planned process and skillful facilitation, groups can move toward consensus decisions relatively quickly.

Misconception #2: Solutions will become watered down. One concern about consensus is that resulting decisions are mediocre or uninspired because they have become watered down by compromises necessary to secure full group member support. An effective consensus process does not compromise on what's important. It seeks to find solutions that fully achieve the group's criteria and goals while at the same time addressing individual members' concerns. Consensus uses disagreement to tap into innovative approaches that might otherwise be overlooked if minority perspectives were never seriously considered.

Misconception #3: People with personal agendas will hijack the process. In any group process there is a possibility that a dysfunctional member or outside agitator may derail the decision process. Pre-established ground rules, strong facilitation, and a clear distinction between legitimate and non-legitimate "blocks" of a decision are essential to prevent this from happening.

Misconception #4: Managers and formal leaders will lose their authority. Managers are often concerned that agreeing to a consensus process means they are giving up their ability to influence the final decision. They wonder, "Am I abdicating my role as a leader if I use consensus?" In consensus formal leaders are equal members of the decision group. They, like any other member, can stop a proposal if they do not feel comfortable with the solution.

Misconception #5: People are not accountable when decisions have "shared ownership." The concern is that group-based decisions diffuse accountability. However, no group member is anonymous or invisible in consensus—quite the contrary. True consensus requires every participant to publicly proclaim not just his or her agreement with a proposal but full commitment to support the decision's implementation.

The Stages of a Collaborative Process

A collaborative decision-making process moves through three general stages, each with its own set of activities.

1. Before: The sponsor conducts an assessment to determine whether or not to initiate a collaborative process. If the decision is to move forward, the sponsor works with a convener to bring diverse interests to the table and selects a neutral forum and facilitator to help plan and organize the process.
2. During: Participants jointly agree to objectives and ground rules for the process. Participants then come together to exchange information, frame the issues, engage in problem-solving discussions, generate and evaluate options, develop mutually acceptable solutions, and secure the endorsement of all constituencies and authorized decision makers.
3. After: Participants work together to implement their agreements, including formalizing the decisions, carrying them out, and monitoring the results.

This basic outline, which underlies most all collaborative governance processes, will be elaborated on in the remaining chapters. In the next chapter we will begin by examining the conditions and circumstances that need to be present in order to undertake a collaborative process.