

ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY

The Discussion Leader's Guide to Public Issue Dispute Resolution and Participatory Decision-Making

Volume 5

Process Design - Understanding the Stakeholder

Identifying the stakeholders is key to the success of a consensus-building process. Frequently, individuals or organizations with a stake in the outcome attempt to destroy the process because they felt they were not involved in the process until it was too late to impact the decision.

Who are the Stakeholders?

Stakeholders include those:

- who have the authority to make the decision
- who have the potential or the power to obstruct an agreement or its implementation
- who are affected or potentially affected by a solution

Every member of a community may somehow be affected by an issue. Yet many will choose not to participate. They may believe that their views are already represented, that their impact will be negligible or that the issue has already been decided.

Early on, it is often important to separate stakeholders into the categories of primary and secondary. Primary stakeholders are those, who because of power, status, position, or responsibility are central to making the consensus agreement work. Primary stakeholders are often consulted about how to construct an acceptable citizen involvement plan since the plan needs to respond to their expectations. Secondary stakeholders may still need to be involved in the process, but their role is peripheral to the central role of primary stakeholders. Secondary stakeholders need to be kept informed as the process unfolds.

Identifying leadership and ultimately determining representation of primary stakeholders is often a part of the process designer's task. Optimally, this task is shared by the stakeholders. Leaders likely to be influential often include those who:

- hold leadership positions in organizations with a stake in the issue
- are perceived as influential by the stakeholders
- have participated in prior similar decisions
- participate in a wide range of community activities

Basic Questions for Stakeholder Analysis

Before you can begin a collaborative process, you should attempt to answer a number of questions regarding the people who are involved in the issue, and can work together to resolve it.

1. Who Should be at the Table?

- Who is responsible for making the decision?
- Who may be affected by potential solutions?
- Who may be able to carry a decision made by the group, or block it?

2. How Is Each Party Organized?

- Are the parties primarily organizational entities?
- What is their structure - hierarchical? collective?
- Does each organization have identified leadership?
- What is the relationship between the leadership and others?

Government and private sector organizations often use hierarchical structures where all decision-making power is vested at the top.

Citizen groups, on the other hand, often have very flat hierarchies and leaders with little authority. The decision-making power is often vested with the members of the group.

If the stakeholders come primarily from hierarchical organizations, each organization may only desire a few representatives at the table. On the other hand, if there are many organizations with grass-roots dominated structures, a much larger group of people may need to participate.

If each party is well organized and will vest responsibility in its leadership, ascertaining representatives will be easier.

There are also circumstances where individual stakeholders are not represented by any particular organization. Because the process is often as important to individuals as it is to groups, their involvement may be crucial to building and implementing consensus agreements.

3. How Are The Parties Linked?

Groups will often develop an identity based upon other groups to which they relate. Some groups will be **horizontally linked** to similar groups. For example, a neighborhood association may be linked to similar associations through a federation.

Other groups will have **vertical links** to those outside the community. Professional

groups such as bar associations and medical societies have these characteristics. In addition, many local chapters of national activist organizations such as the Sierra Club or the National Rifle Association also share this characteristic.

Groups with horizontal links know their geographic community. Their contribution is often expertise in assessing community views, needs and expectations.

Groups with vertical links often can bring technical expertise and sophisticated political experience to public involvement processes.

4. What Is The Power Base Of Each Of The Parties?

Many parties that do not have any formal authority to make a decision may still seek to influence the decision. Therefore, it may be helpful to ask the following questions:

- Does any party have the capacity to block a decision that they do not approve?
- Does any party have an incentive to escalate the conflict?
- What is the capacity of each party to sustain its involvement over time?
- Does any party need another party in order to accomplish its goals? Does interdependence exist between these parties and the decision makers?
- Does any party have past experience with joint decision-making process?
- Would any party need specific assistance to effectively participate in a joint decision-making process?

If a party has the capacity to block a decision, it should be involved in the process. Similarly, if a party has the capacity to sustain an activity, it may be able to effectively participate in the joint decision-making process. If the parties need each other to accomplish their objectives, joint decision-making may be appropriate.

Of the parties who do have formal authority for making a decision:

- Can the parties make and implement any decision they please?
- Can the parties protect their essential interests in the decision no matter how the decision is made? How?
- Are the parties constrained by previous decisions or decisions made by others? (e.g., legislative bodies, precedent)
- Can the parties sustain their involvement over time in any kind of process (e.g., legal, negotiated)
- Do the parties need other parties to accomplish their goals?
- Do the parties have any experience with joint decision-making processes?

If the parties can make and implement any decision they please, reasons for entering joint decision-making will be for other than their substantive interests. If they cannot implement any decision that they please, they may seek a process where they can protect their essential interests and sustain their involvement over time.

5. How Has Power Been Used In The Situation?

- Have any of the parties used their power such that other parties have felt it has been to prevent them from reaching their goals?
- Have any of the parties used their power to help other parties?

If one of the parties has systematically used its power in a direct attempt to injure other parties, those parties will be distrustful and wary of joint decision-making processes.

6. What Do Each Of The Parties Want?

- What are the stated positions of each party?
- What are the stated goals of each party?
- What are the underlying interests of each party?
- What are the dominant values that appear to guide the actions of each party? Are they mutually exclusive?

- Do any of the positions, goals, interests, values, or issues of any party challenge the identity of other parties?
- Does this situation represent high stakes for any party?
- Are there common interests which might provide the basis for an agreement?

Knowing what motivates each of the parties -and whether there are overlapping interests - can help predict whether the parties will see any value in coming to the table. Parties involved in identity or high-stakes conflicts will often need to be reassured that it's essential interests will be protected.

7. What is the Status of Past Relationships?

- Do any of the parties have a history of relationships with other parties?
- Has that history been productive or conflictive?
- Were the relationships characterized by trust and respect?
- Have any of the parties avoided other parties because they believed that working relationships would be difficult?

Past relationships that worked well can be the basis for developing joint decision-making efforts. Difficult relationships, especially those characterized by distrust, may need to be addressed directly for joint decision-making to be productive.

8. What is the Status Of Current Relationships?

- Has the nature of the relationships between the parties changed over time?
- Are there existing working relationships?
- How are the parties communicating with one another?
- If they are not communicating directly, are there any trusted intermediaries?
- Do the parties accept each other's role in developing a joint agreement?

If the current relationships are healthy, joint decision-making will help maintain strong relationships. If current relationships are contentious or characterized by lack of trust,

either a strong past relationship, a desire for a future relationship, or high levels of interdependence can mitigate current difficulties.

9. Are Future Relationships Important?

- Do any of the parties desire a future working relationship with other parties?
- Will the parties need to work together on implementing an agreement?
- Are the parties forced to interact regularly because of the nature of their work or networks?

A desire for a future working relationship can be a strong impetus for using joint decision-making processes.

Understanding the stakeholder population, their organizations, their networks, and the context in which they work can help you determine how to structure a conflict resolution or citizen involvement process that meets their needs.

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