

CHAPTER 5: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE SUCCESS OF COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS

Once collaborative initiatives have formed, what factors make them successful? Interviewees in the case studies investigated identified the informal structure of their group, as well the presence of certain personalities, as key contributing factors. Other elements, such as a shared sense of place, the local origins of the group, a favorable external environment, parity among participants, and a long time for operation were present and helping groups to succeed as well (Table 5).

Factors contributing to the success of collaborative efforts

- Informal structure of group
- Personalities
- Shared sense of place
- Local origins
- Favorable external environment
- Parity among participants
- Long time frame for operation

Table 5: Factors contributing to the success of collaborative efforts

INFORMAL STRUCTURE OF GROUP

On the whole, the current structure of most of the collaborative efforts was seen in a positive light. Two key factors were raised as primary contributors to this success: the retained autonomy of participating groups and the informality of the overall effort. One Blufflands participant described the effort as made up of “six organizations [that] will continue to want to be independent organizations, each of which has other focuses in addition to the Blufflands and wants to keep those.” Fortunately, the Alliance is structured to be able to accommodate these demands. The retained autonomy was described by another Alliance member as “the strength, I think, of the Alliance. No one is telling you how you have to do it. We have common goals, but nobody says you have to do it this way.” This autonomy also applied to participants’ relationships with government partners. This was appreciated by one participant greatly, who commented that “I think the strength of the Blufflands Alliance is that right now it is all private and we all work very closely with our governmental partners, so we certainly aren’t excluding them, we just work with them individually.” Thus, a lack of formalized policies and procedures, in some regards, was viewed in a positive light.

The informal structure of many of the efforts was praised by other interviewees as well. According to a North Quabbin participant, “I think the value of partnerships lies in fact that they are somewhat informal, they are somewhat loose.” This was echoed by a Dune Alliance member, who relished the savings of energy an informal structure allowed: “what I like about the Dune Alliance is that it doesn’t have a formal structure. We don’t waste our time talking about extraneous matters. There’s no bureaucracy to breathe life into every couple of days.”

In addition to the above benefits, the informal nature of the groups also enhanced participating trust’s relationship to governmental partners, when present, as seen in the comments below.

- “It has been very beneficial to have both the government and the nonprofit partners involved because it is a more informal setting. It is really a chance for committed individuals, regardless of where they work, to share techniques and ideas and progress outside of the more official pathways.”
- “By keeping it informal, folks from the agencies who participate, it’s not in any official capacity, so we get away with a lot, because it’s informal. I think it’s really to our benefit.”
- “The informal context means that people aren’t speaking officially for their agency even though they happen to work there. They didn’t have to clear their position with their boss to make a comment about what they are doing, it’s more informal, so it actually builds a working relationship.”

PERSONALITIES

Although the presence of certain personalities was also cited as a challenge, participants often pointed to some personalities within their groups as key contributors to the efforts’ overall success. One participant commented that their leader “has a good style, he has a very low key approach, and people listen.” Another participant felt that “you have to make sure, if it is an alliance, that someone doesn’t try to dominate and tell others what to do. I think that’s a strength of...our coordinator, he is very much not that way.” Even more emphatically, one group decided to join an effort in large part because

of the leader. “Anything [the leader] does, or wants to do, we will say yes. If [the leader] is in, we are in,” this participant explained.

Where coordination was handled by staff, kudos was extended in their direction as well. “They are a tremendously talented staff!” one participant raved. Another attributed the success of his effort to “our having an excellent staff, they have provided real vision and leadership in the growth and development of the organization.” Last but not least, other personalities in the room can contribute greatly to an effort’s success. Having a certain State Secretary of Environmental Affairs involved in one effort was repeatedly cited as a critical factor enhancing the group’s success.

SHARED SENSE OF PLACE

A critical element found to help natural resource based collaborative efforts succeed involves developing a shared sense of place. If participants share a common attachment to a landscape, and thus a common interest in it, they are more likely to come together to discuss its future. As Wondolleck and Yaffee noted, “a sense of place can help promote collaboration. In a number of successful collaborative processes, strong identification with a geographic location, biophysical feature, or community or neighborhood has provided the foundation on which the cooperative effort was built” (Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000, p. 73). A shared sense of place was noted in some group efforts. One Dune Alliance participant explained that the “dunes are the signature landscape of Michigan,” expressing a belief in their significance and importance. A Blufflands Alliance participant admitted to being “in love with the river;” this kind of attachment will no doubt help the Alliance succeed.

LOCAL ORIGINS

The case studies all have another successful element present: their local origins. “People identify with a local concern and feel positively about it, unlike initiatives imposed from elsewhere,” Wondolleck and Yaffee noted (2000, p. 75). One case study these authors investigated was found to have “been successful in part because it is well grounded in local institutions and staffed by local people” (Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000, p. 75). None of the land trust collaborations investigated were created by a

legislative mandate, for example; rather, they were formed out of a desire by the local groups involved to come together and discuss working at a larger scale. “Primarily, it was a result of [early participants’] minds thinking along the same lines,” one participant explained. This fact should help them down the road.

FAVORABLE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Another element found to be a contributor to successful collaborations is a favorable political/social climate (Griffith, 2001). Most of the organizations interviewed, especially those in the Bay Area Open Space Council, expressed a sense of support from their members and local communities, indicating a favorable external environment. Similarly, a North Quabbin participant felt that their members were “definitely aware and they strongly encourage” participation, and a Dune Alliance participant noted “broad support among the membership.” Others, especially in the Northern Rockies Initiative, were unsure about community reactions. This factor could prove critical to this group’s future success.

PARITY AMONG PARTICIPANTS

Most case study participants evidenced a belief that their group exhibited parity among the participants, another key factor to group success. Although focused on negotiations, Gray advised that “taking steps to ensure that all stakeholders are relatively equal players in the negotiations may also be necessary” (1989, p. 62); this advice no doubt holds true in any cooperative effort. Fortunately, this did not seem to be a problematic issue in any of the groups examined. Even in a group where one participant was identified as being “more equal than the other equals,” the interviewee felt that the potentially dominant organization “had a very low-key approach to it” and “was very pleased” with how the overall effort functioned.

LONG TIME FRAME FOR OPERATION

Another critical factor present in some collaborations investigated was a long time frame for operation. Why is this important? One, “reciprocity develops through recurrent interactions” (Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000, p. 66). Second, it takes time to

develop trust. It was only over time that participants in one study “could test whether their opponents were cooperating, and relationships could be established that could foster cooperation” (Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000, p. 67). The Blufflands Alliance and the Bay Area Open Space Council are both around a decade old. This extended time frame has given them time to develop trust in the process as well as the other participants; members of both efforts frequently expressed appreciation for the “the actual, working relationships that get built up with the other groups” through participation.

All in all, “partnerships succeed when...the results are likely to be better than any partner could achieve alone” (Hocker, 1996b, p. 3). As local, grassroots land trusts, most all of the interviewees would not be able to receive many of the benefits to participation--such as access to additional funding and the ability to work at a landscape scale--without joining a larger, collaborative effort. As long as the benefits continue to accrue, participants will work to ensure that the partnerships succeed.