Conducting Cooperative Problem Solving Activities
in Communities
by
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Background
"Cooperative Problem Solving" is a process by which the parties involved in a problem or dispute:
- Sit down together;
- Listen to each others' points of view;
- Identify common fears, hopes and interests; and
- Work to develop solutions that address as many of their interests as possible.

This approach is often called "interest-based" conflict management, as opposed to "rights-based" (approaches that are based on law) or "power-based" (i.e., based on the parties' financial, political, or other unilateral strength). The interest-based or Cooperative Problem Solving approach rests on the possibility that parties who have different positions on how to solve a problem may well base those positions on shared underlying interests.

Each of these approaches has advantages: the rights-based approach aims at justice and compliance with the law, and power-based approaches allow for autonomous actions. Cooperative Problem Solving aims at mutually-supported agreements, improved relationships, and continued problem-solving capacity among the parties.

Cooperative Problem Solving (CPS) can be conducted by individuals, groups, or whole communities. The CPS process described above is essentially the same in any setting. However, as the number of parties increases additional issues must be taken into account: logistical, political, group dynamics, communications, etc. The rest of this paper summarizes the principles and protocols that have been developed in recent years to support successful community CPS processes. *

Underlying Principles
Several principles guide successful CPS processes in communities:
- Representatives of all who will be affected by decisions participate in the process;
- The process is designed by participant representatives;
- Participants receive necessary information and training;
- Transparency: the process is open and the results are well publicized;
- Decision-making authority and responsibility is clearly defined.

Process for Conducting Cooperative Problem Solving in Communities

Phase I – Readiness Assessment and Leadership Decision: The ultimate decision-makers from the involved groups must agree to undertake a CPS approach. Political will is essential. This phase requires a readiness assessment by the leaders, and may involve several steps – informal meetings to test the waters, talking with colleagues who have had similar experiences, conducting research, identifying the risks involved, developing strategies for minimizing those risks, etc. The key items to be considered include:

a. **Purpose:** How do we spell success? What issues will be addressed, and what will the "desired future state" look like if the CPS process is successful?

b. **Stakeholders:** Who is affected the current problem? Who can block resolution or implementation?

c. **Interests:** What are the stakeholders' interests (hopes/fears/concerns)?

d. **Barriers and risks:** What could impede success? What are the risks involved in a CPS approach? How to manage?

e. **Decision-making authority and responsibility:** Who is ultimately responsible? How much influence will the participatory process have on the final decisions?

f. **Facilitation:** What services will be needed?

g. **Resources:** Is there adequate time, funding?

h. **Planning committee members:** Who?

Phase II – Planning

Once the leaders have decided to go ahead, a planning committee of stakeholder representatives meets and addresses a variety of issues to set the stage for a successful CPS process. A typical sequence of events would include:

a. **Introductions** of committee members;

b. **Orientation**: purpose, events to date and events planned;

c. **Committee structure and operating procedures**: The members decide:
   - Are all of the stakeholders represented on the planning committee?
   - Purpose/desired outcomes of the committee;
   - Group process (agenda, ground rules, decision-making process, schedule of events, roles and responsibilities, record keeping, media relations, etc.);

d. **Briefings/ trainings** for the committee as needed;

e. **Design**: The committee designs a CPS process to be conducted by the working group that will best suit the desired purpose (visioning/goal setting, strategic planning, action planning). Issues to be addressed:
   - Information that may need to be collected from the community;
   - Size of working group; how to inform/involve people and groups "that will be outside the room";
   - Information, training needed by participants (technical, CPS process and skills);
   - Facilitation services;
   - Logistics: meeting room space, equipment and materials, administrative support;
   - Transparency, public relations, media;
   - Inviting working group participants.

Phase III – Conducting the CPS process
The stakeholder representatives come together in a series of meetings. Typical sequence of events:
 a. Introductions;
 b. Orientation: events to date, and planned;
 c. Agree on proposed purpose/desired outcomes;
 d. Agree on process (already drafted by the planning group –agenda, ground rules, decision-making process, schedule of events, roles and responsibilities, record keeping, publicity and media);
 e. Receive briefings/ trainings as needed;
 f. Conduct CPS process:
  - Hear and understand each others' point of view;
  - Identify hopes, concerns, interests;
  - Generate possible solutions;
  - Develop agreements (strategies, actions and timelines, roles and responsibilities, follow-up activities).

Phase IV
Implementation, evaluation, and constant improvement