

Why Collaboration Can Sometimes Be Unproductive - but Doesn't Have to Be

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At the National Policy Consensus Center at Portland State University, I have worked on dozens of the center's nearly 400 collaborative public processes and projects over the last fifteen years. And I'm often brought in to train or consult with collaborative groups that are "stuck." They've sometimes been working months or even years without making much progress, and old divisions feel exacerbated rather than healed.

After some investigation, I often tell these groups that the problem is they're not working hard enough. "How can you say that?" they ask, "We've been meeting every month for the past three years!" Yes, they have, but instead of working hard at collaborating, they've actually been competing; each side working to convince the other they are in the right. They are not seeking agreement so much as they are looking for surrender. And I remind them that just because two boxers are in the same ring does not mean that they are collaborating.

It is not unreasonable to want to further your own interests. When competing with others, you accomplish that by prevailing over the other party; you cannot win unless they lose (think sports, or elections). Particularly on contentious public issues, like land use or forest management, this is the mindset that participants can unconsciously bring to their "collaboration." They may even believe that what they are asking for is but a small and reasonable sacrifice from the other side in order to achieve the significant social benefits represented by their point of view.

Real collaboration, on the other hand, requires honoring of the legitimacy of others' interests; it requires moving from the question of who's right and who's wrong to the question of how to reconcile competing or incompatible goals. (There may, in fact, be situations where the legitimate goal is indeed to prevail over another. But let's call that what it is: competition.) Real collaboration involves working toward an outcome where there is perceived benefit to each party. And here's the somewhat surprising and direct implication: When engaged in collaborative agreement-seeking, you cannot win unless the other side also wins.

In a true collaboration, each party works hard to find that space where the other side feels the outcome has been worth their time and effort. (Why else would they engage?) This is a fundamentally different approach than trying to get the other side to capitulate. The central question goes from "Why won't you give just a little more?" to "How can we make this proposal work for you?" And, in my experience, once the parties commit to the joint enterprise of finding that "win-win" space, reaching agreement is the easy part.

Okay, sometimes it's not so easy. When groups have widely disparate interests, finding "northeast" (win-win) can sometimes be extremely difficult and requires very creative problem-solving.

One reason for this is that the parties often have a history of behaving competitively (rather than collaboratively) with each other. Each therefore tends to see the relationship as win-lose, rather than win-win, and in public policy disputes each often has a vocal constituency that reinforces that view. Moreover, with a competitive history, it is not surprising when each party feels aggrieved by the other side's past transgressions, and each sees the collaborative process as an opportunity to prove they were right all along. And finally, each side probably has a substantial investment (of time, money, political capital) in the righteousness of their position.

These are difficult challenges, indeed. So, how do you get former adversaries to actually sit down and try to work out win-win solutions? I start by challenging the parties as to whether they are really willing to accept that the other side needs to come out with a win also. If they're not, the "collaboration" will almost certainly fail.

Second, I try to help the parties re-frame the issue from "who's right-who's wrong?" to "How do we reconcile two legitimate interests that are in tension?"

Perhaps most importantly, I try to get the parties to recognize their interdependence. Without an interdependent relationship, there is really no point in trying to collaborate. So I ask the parties: "What do you need from them? What do they need from you? And what will the outcome be if there is no collaborative agreement?"

I find that when parties in a public policy dispute have been fighting for years, and then decide to collaborate, they often make the mistake of reaching for too much. When trust is low and the stakes are high, the risks are too great for either side to agree. So, I encourage the parties to begin by seeking small, low-risk, early agreements. These small endeavors create opportunities for mutual learning and building trust incrementally. From here, the parties can move on to bigger and bigger stakes as trust builds incrementally.

As I said, getting current and former adversaries to sit down together and creatively find win-win solutions is hard work, but that's the productive and ultimately rewarding work of collaboration.