

The Powerful Role of Convener

Steve Greenwood, MPA, Director of Training and Academic Services
National Policy Consensus Center
Hatfield School of Government

You know, when different parties show up to a meeting or show up to participate in a collaborative process of some kind, they don't just happen to be there by accident. Someone has to invite them. And that's the role of a convener. And the convener has such a powerful influence on the success or non-success of a collaborative process. And I wanted to take a few moments to explain that role.

It seems like everybody these days is convening some sort of meeting or process or gathering of some kind. And it's, I think, helpful to really take a look under the hood and see what goes into that role of a convener. And the first thing of course is, in fact, to invite the parties to the table. It's a really important role, and not everybody is able to do that. I like to say that the right convener is someone who can get the right people there and help them act like grown-ups once they get there.

We find that some of the best conveners are either political elected leaders, business leaders, or community leaders of some sort, people with some stature and credibility and legitimacy in the community, but who are not seen, necessarily, as having, you know, a parochial interest in the particular issue or project at hand. Now sometimes you can accomplish that purpose by actually having co-conveners—by having someone who represents, you know, a strong interest on one side of an issue, and somebody who represents an opposing interest. And they may not agree on what the best outcome would be, but together they have the stature to say to the group: “You know, we need to solve this collaboratively. We need to work together and come out with a collaborative solution.”

Another role that the convener can play is really to serve as the conscience of the group or the community that that group is trying to serve. So, they do that by framing what the issue is in a way that everybody can work together on it. They do that by reminding people of the importance of the issue and the public interest involved. And, sometimes, as a group goes through their

process, people tend to retreat to their various corners and their own parochial interests, and a convener can help people sort of bring them back to why they're there in the first place and what the community interest is and why it's important that they work together and try to find compromises in some cases or to share resources so they can make something happen.

The last thing that the convener can do is to really serve as the public face for the project. Sometimes, particularly when there's controversy involved, you don't want one side or another being the spokesperson in the media for a particular collaborative group, and the convener can then serve that purpose and really speak for the entire group and their collaboration, as opposed to speaking from a parochial interest. Again, when there are co-conveners, it is sometimes helpful to have both of those co-conveners in the media talking about the project, so that people get the impression that, yes, this is something where people are working together to try to find a common solution.