

Abby White – National Policy Consensus Center – March 4, 2004

NPCC – We work with leaders at the state levels to figure out how to address some of the most difficult policy issues. Our goal is to bring different points of views to the table with the goal of reaching consensus. We work with developing rules with agencies: devising rules where many different interests come together from their points of view. We attempt to devise a process where these viewpoints can work together to an agreed upon end.

My background: Right out of high school I had a Transformative experience. I joined Americore in Boston. I worked with a team of other volunteers in a low-income area of Boston. That year opened my eyes to issues of economic justice and equality. It opened me to change and made me want to learn about the systems that are at play, the systems that often contribute to and create inequities. I went to Brown University and studied public policy. If you ever have the opportunity to spend part of you life giving to the community, I encourage you to take advantage of that.

Four elements of consensus building:

Assessment – This is, in my opinion, the most important part of the process. You must construct a clear definition of the problem. You try to find out who the interested parties are – the stakeholders. If you are dealing with a watershed issues, then you have to find the sources of pollution, what is the extent of the pollution, what geographic regions are involved, what businesses, etc? Who needs to come to the table? This is a bottom up approach.

Convening Role – When the group comes together, there is a role for a convener. He or she needs to be seen as neutral and credible. This person(s) needs to be able to bring together people who may not trust each other.

Process – The next step is figuring out what process needs to be followed. The key to any consensus-based process is to end each meeting with some agreement. Write it down. Build in small steps.

Agreement – In the end the parties need to sign the agreements.

Q – How does one choose a convener? In my organization we ask the stakeholders for suggestions. In some cases you need to have co conveners. It may not be possible to agree upon just one person as a trusted leader.

Q – Does the agreement process have to end with a majority rule? That depends upon the process. Ground rules must be set at the start of the Process portion of the work. The issue often governs the type of process decided upon.

Example: Wind Farms – This issue was to site a 12-turbine 24 megawatt wind farm in Oregon. I had to figure out, in the assessment, what the issues were. They were: bird safety, cultural lands and proximity to an airport.

- This site was near the Columbia River which is a great migratory bird path north / south.
- This land was adjacent to a large Native American site, especially important cultural sites.
- There was a small airport near the site. The lights might confuse pilots.

Stakeholders: (There were actually 12.) developer, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Warm Springs Tribe, land owners, county government

Convener: We used a county judge. (We could not choose the local judge because of a conflict of interest.)

Process: We decided to use small teams formed from the interests that brought back to the larger group proposed solutions.

Agreement: Key pieces ended up being design and placement of the turbines. Typically the developer will have collected a lot of wind data through long-term studies. In this case, the “best” wind sites were not acceptable to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. The final agreement included different tower design and slight changes in placement. The rotors used were designed to rotate much more slowly. Each stakeholder gave some concessions. Fish and Wildlife shortened a study period.

Q – Mr. Oravec asked for strategies that can be used when a group reaches impasse. There are tools, according to Abby. A strong assessment is the most important part. There is a difference between interests and positions. A party might put out a statement of interest, but the facilitator’s role is to find out what the interest is that is underlying the position. The convener must constantly attempt to understand the interests. There is also a “strong-arm” approach. There is actually a type of peer pressure that works in these processes. The convener may have to push. There are times when a process falls apart. This ends in litigation, ends in the courts. Legislation is also another option.

We are after a bottom-up process vs. a top-down process.

Q – What effects do letters to the editor have on these types of issues? Abby stated that letters in the media have a great deal to do with applying pressure. It also depends upon the degree of the crisis.

Q – Are the stakeholders allowed to have legal representation? Abby said that it is possible, but that she has not gone through a process where there lawyers involved.

In our type of process we want people to come together to the table for the purpose of agreeing in the end to a mutually defined solution.

At this point we divided into a sample problem-solving exercise for the assessment piece:

1. What are the issues, points of conflict?
2. Who are the stakeholders?
 - a) Local government?
 - b) State?
 - c) Business
 - d) Nonprofits
 - e) Communities?
 - f) Citizen groups?