

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM FACILITATING THE STATE AND TRIBAL GOVERNMENT WORKING GROUP

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### ABSTRACT

Thirteen lessons learned from my experience in facilitating the State and Tribal Government Working Group for the U.S. Department of Energy have been identified. The conceptual base for supporting the veracity of each lesson has been developed and the lessons are believed to be transferable to any stakeholder group. The crux of stakeholder group success is the two-directional, two-mode empowerment required in this case. Most of the lessons learned deal with the scope of that empowerment. A few of the lessons learned deal with the operations of the group.

### INTRODUCTION

Facilitating the State and Tribal Government Working Group for the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has revealed and defined lessons learned I believe should become principles for organizing and facilitating public involvement groups. The State and Tribal Government Working Group (STGWG), formed in 1989 as DOE's first national public involvement group, includes gubernatorial representatives from states with DOE facilities, affected Indian Nations, and state government associations. STGWG has met quarterly to provide input to the DOE-EM Five-Year Plan for Environmental Restoration and Waste Management and associated policy issues potentially affecting the health and safety of workers, the public, and the environment.

As a neutral, third-party facilitator of these meetings since 1989, I've identified lessons learned and listed them below as observations followed by discussions explaining each one. STGWG members have reviewed the first ten lessons and their conceptual justifications and have tacitly accepted them. I've developed the last three lessons recently. I've written the lessons to be understandable and applicable to all DOE stakeholder/public involvement activities. These lessons are corroborated by my experience developing or facilitating two other DOE public involvement programs: the Environmental Management Advisory Committee (EMAC) and the annual Stakeholders' Forum.

I believe you can substitute the name for any stakeholder group for STGWG and substitute the name for any convenor, or sponsoring agency, for DOE, and the lessons learned will transfer. Other substitutions also apply, such as substituting a state system for lessons about the federal system. Therefore, this paper isn't about STGWG or DOE. Instead, this paper is about improving stakeholder group activities based on fundamental, generalizable lessons learned from the STGWG experience.

### OBSERVATIONS FROM FACILITATING STGWG

1. If DOE brings organizational results rather than organizational processes to STGWG, the best DOE can expect is criticism.
2. If DOE brings the urgent instead of the important to STGWG, the best DOE can expect is frustration.
3. A person outside the federal system sees any insider as speaking for the entire perceived system.
4. The need for stakeholders to feel informed doesn't necessitate discussion of or response to all issues.
5. If STGWG members seek individual aims before system-wide clean-up aims, STGWG fails.
6. The facilitator must focus on the meeting process not the meeting content.
7. Public involvement and consensus require leadership and training from everyone.
8. Without specific action items, participants feel non-productive.
9. Each participant remembers his or her uncompleted perceived action item as a failed promise of the group and/or its convenor (DOE).
10. When stakeholders are involved, their feedback turns constructive.
11. Without constancy and consistency of purpose, STGWG flounders for meaning and existence.
12. STGWG doesn't feel empowered just because DOE says so or even because DOE's intentions are good.
13. If DOE doesn't recognize the inherent variation in stakeholders' descriptions of DOE, they'll feel maligned.

### DISCUSSION OF OBSERVATIONS

#### If DOE Brings Organizational Results Rather Than Organizational Processes to STGWG, the Best DOE Can Expect Is Criticism

Through the famous funnel experiment, W. Edwards Deming (1) shows that if you act on results your efforts will move you farther and farther away from your target. However, if you act on the process and improve the process you can improve your results and get closer to your target. Results are necessary only as a window into the process. Mathematically, there's no way around this issue.

People involved in organizational processes are forward thinking. People involved in organizational results are backward thinking. If the objective is to improve, then the only ways available to STGWG for acting on organizational results most likely will make matters worse; and if the acting on the results is advice, the only possible advice is criticism.

If DOE brings an organizational result to STGWG like a plan (such as the Five-year Plan), method (such as a prioritization system), policy (such as the Indian policy), and so on and asks for input, the input they'll get is what's wrong with the plan, method, or policy, not what's right with it. Bringing a settled-on process isn't much better. For positive input, DOE

must bring a process in the formulation stage and supply only the aim of the process and the constraints on the process. The process begets the result; so, if a group works the process cooperatively, the group members own the results together.

To make a contribution, STGWG can make suggestions toward a good or better process and can participate in the process. They will own the results as much as DOE does. Given these results, the only thing left to do is to figure out a way to improve the process to get better results.

#### **If DOE Brings the Urgent Instead of the Important to STGWG, the Best DOE Can Expect Is Frustration**

Participative interaction and involvement is heavily front-end loaded, time-wise. In other words, you can't push participative interaction faster than the ability for a large group to give each person a chance to express his or her views and to work on gaps between suggestions.

Typically, DOE comes to STGWG in a perpetual condition of being up to their ears in alligators. Anyone in this situation would want to share any alligator with any sympathetic ear. While these issues are important and STGWG needs to be fully informed, no participative process can act quickly—relative to individual decision making and action taking. Issues with a reasonable lead time can be affected and improved through public involvement. Stephen Covey (2) and Peter Drucker (3) say we must learn to put the important before the urgent.

People who're working together on a process for a long-term solution accept expediencies needed to keep up with day-to-day situations while crafting the solution.

#### **A Person Outside the Federal System Sees Any Insider as Speaking for the Entire Perceived System**

Outsiders don't delimit responsibilities of the insider the way insiders do. Generally speaking, STGWG members feel they're outside the federal government system. So, to them, anyone in the federal government represents and is responsible for everything the federal government does.

There are two ways to deal with this untenable situation. In the short term, the federal government representative can make connections between the outsider and the person inside the federal government appropriate to the outsider's concern. In this way, the insider represents the parts of the perceived system for which they aren't responsible as a broker or matchmaker. In the long term, when the outsider participates enough in developing and contributing to the processes of the perceived system, they'll be able to divide the larger system into its subsystems until they see the insider as responsible for what the insider feels they're responsible for.

This misunderstanding of extent of responsibility and authority clears up when the stakeholders gain ownership of the processes in the ominous system they feel outsiders of.

#### **The Need for Stakeholders to Feel Informed Doesn't Necessitate Discussion of or Response to all Issues**

Informed people are more comfortable with each other and make better decisions both for themselves and for the group. People who feel uninformed or misinformed feel threatened. However, there are more efficient ways than formal STGWG meetings to inform STGWG and DOE of each other's situation and needs. Document distribution, news dissemination (immediate happenings), and workshops in coordination with formal STGWG meetings can help the formal meetings be more productive.

#### **If STGWG Members Seek Individual Aims before System-wide Clean-up Aims, STGWG Fails**

Deming says, "If the parts are optimized, the system will not be. If the system is optimized, the parts will not be." (4) STGWG members must be eternally vigilant of issues carrying the potential of distracting them from the national clean-up effort.

If STGWG members focus on the common aim of the group (the common system), they can achieve cooperation. However, if STGWG members begin to focus on the aims of their individual state or tribe (the parts of the system), they get wrapped up in competition—usually for a limited resource, such as funding.

Each STGWG member represents a part (subsystem) of the national clean-up effort (common system). Any issue having the potential to cause STGWG members to refocus from national clean-up to a parochial need represents a threat to STGWG's contribution.

When perceiving multi-million-dollar funding as potentially available to STGWG, members become distracted into a zero-sum game for optimizing the parts (each State's portion of the funding) at the expense of the whole (National clean-up). As STGWG matures, it will increase its potential energy and power. Everyone will be tempted to focus that power on their specific needs. Doing so will hurt STGWG. STGWG must always focus on the national clean-up effort.

#### **The Facilitator Must Focus on the Meeting Process not the Meeting Content**

The facilitator must be an honest broker. The facilitator is responsible to balance moving the meeting process forward to the needed conclusion with ensuring each stakeholder gets ample opportunity to express his or her views. When the quality of a decision can't be tested, group members perceive information sharing, resolution of conflict, and opportunity to express their views as decision quality or consensus. (5)

In any group (and especially a group as large as STGWG), a facilitator's full-time job is scrupulously watching for hesitation in participating by group members, concern that questions aren't addressed or answered, desire that the sequence of generated ideas be followed, all agenda items are fairly addressed, action items are recognized and followed-up, and many more. This full-time job is not concerned with logistics like seating and writing ideas on paper. Instead, the job is to ensure stakeholders get to express their views, are heard or know the reason why not, and that diverse ideas get a fair hearing.

The facilitator must ensure meeting process expectations are set and met. For example, when consensus isn't needed or sought, the worst idea is to expect consensus. The facilitator must make sure the group sets the expectations they need and can produce.

#### **Public Involvement and Consensus Require Leadership and Training from Everyone**

Leadership for participative groups can come from the facilitator in terms of the meeting process, from the convenor in terms of needs and constraints, and from the group members in terms of meeting content and products. Max DePree says the art of leadership is "liberating people to do what is required of them in the most effective and humane way possible." (6) In STGWG, DOE, STGWG members, and the



facilitator have the opportunity to practice the art of leadership.

To come to worthwhile group results, participants must learn about the system they're addressing, current and long-term issues, and group process implementation.

#### **Without Specific Action Items, Participants Feel Non-productive**

People like tangible evidence of accomplishment — especially in time-consuming meetings. Documented decisions made, items for action, and action items addressed provide tangible evidence. When an issue is raised that needs a decision or action, the facilitator or any group member needs to make sure a specific action item is identified and assigned and that a date and method for bringing the resolution to the group is documented for later reference and check off. Without regular and frequent tangible evidence of accomplishment, group members feel they're bringing up old issues ignored in the past so they can be ignored in the future.

#### **Each Participant Remembers His or Her Uncompleted Perceived Action Item as a Failed Promise of the Group and/or its Convenor (DOE)**

Sooner or later, a person remembers any issue for which they thought an action was to be taken. To him or her, the perceived action item becomes an actual action item that isn't carried out. Then trust is weakened. It's easier in the long run to track all action items and confront forgotten or low-priority action items with the person who cares.

Stakeholder groups and government conveners are responsible for a public trust. Neither the group nor the convenor deserves or achieves the public trust until they can achieve mutual trust within the group and between group members and the convenor. Mutual trust is paramount — the foundation on which everything else is built. As priorities compete for attention during periods of rapid change and the surfacing of important issues, mutual trust must come first.

#### **When Stakeholders Are Involved, Their Feedback Turns Constructive**

Stakeholders involved in process issues rather than result issues contribute by improving the process rather than criticizing the results. Faced with process-formation issues, the tendency is to improve the process — resulting in suggestions for what is to come. Faced with results issues, the tendency is to improve the results — resulting in criticism of what is past.

I've adapted an old Chinese proverb to read: Tell 'em and they'll forget; show 'em and they'll remember; involve 'em and they'll understand. I'll restate this idea in stakeholder meeting terms: Give 'em a briefing and they'll forget; take 'em on a tour and they'll remember; listen actively and integrate their ideas (I'll discuss empowerment later.) and they'll understand. When a member of the group understand the purpose, constraints, needs, issues, status, and progress, he or she wants to help. His or her response to any associated occurrence is largely constructive.

Don't get into the stakeholder group business unless you're after understanding. People who understand feel a sense of ownership. Ownership leads to cooperation and wanting to improve rather than to sitting and criticizing.

The convenor needs to recognize what's constructive. When STGWG's agenda includes results and urgent issues — things most conducive to criticism and frustration — constructive involvement can seem critical.

#### **Without Constancy and Consistency of Purpose, STGWG Flounders for Meaning and Existence**

STGWG must develop and preferably get ownership through participation in developing STGWG's purpose. The purpose of STGWG is the purpose of the group, not necessarily the purpose of DOE. While STGWG must focus on the national cleanup aim, they must have a purpose for their interaction, or a group aim. The purpose, or aim, of the group can't be limited or capricious, because the purpose won't be maintained long enough for the group to be successful. When the purpose is met or becomes superfluous, a new purpose must be developed immediately for the group to continue.

STGWG was established ostensibly to review the Five-year Plan, but DOE couldn't mesh the review process with the production process with any reasonable lead-time due to glitches in releasing budget numbers and in getting internal approvals on plan content. Although STGWG has commented extensively on the Five-year Plan and has suggested improvements in the process, STGWG has felt frustrated with the stated purpose and hasn't yet found another. The only way to improve this situation is to face up to the empowerment issue in lesson 12.

Bill Scherkenbach says that constancy of purpose is necessary for success. "As Dr. Deming says, 'Do you know that doing your best is not good enough? You have to know what to do. Then do your best.' These are profound words because they summarize the two important messages in [Deming's] first point: that of knowing what to do — establishing the constancy of purpose and then doing your best — maintaining consistency of purpose." (7) STGWG and DOE are both doing their best, but with no constant and consistent purpose for the group, STGWG flounders. Who is responsible for STGWG's purpose?

#### **STGWG Doesn't Feel Empowered Just Because DOE Says So or Even Because DOE's Intentions Are Good**

Neither DOE nor STGWG, nor perhaps anybody else, knows exactly what empowerment means or how to do empowerment. In empowerment, we don't know what it takes to get the behavior we consider to be empowered behavior. We think that if we say "You're empowered," the person or people we said it to will behave the way we expect. We believe that if we go beyond words and give the person or people space and resources, they'll act empowered. Can we give them the responsibility and authority? How about accountability? Even if we could give them all that, what about their empowered behavior? We must give them something more fundamental. We must give them an attitude. An attitude is a belief that influences emotions, behavior, and what the members of the group think.

To me, empowerment means more than the idea you have the right to make decisions and take actions. I believe empowerment means you have the 1) self-confidence, 2) optimism, 3) perceived control, 4) purpose, 5) trust, 6) self-esteem, 7) accountability, 8) causality, and 9) loyalty, 10) stewardship, 11) ownership to do what needs to be done. Without these eight attributes, can you really fulfill your responsibilities for contributing to a group? These eleven attributes mean that, through empowerment, a person feels: 1) "I can do it," from self-confidence; 2) "I expect the best," from optimism; 3) "I can make a difference," from perceived control; 4) "I'm doing something meaningful," from purpose; 5) "I feel safe," from trust; 6) "I believe in myself," from self-esteem; 7) "I care,"

from accountability; 8) "I have a choice," from causality; 9) "I belong," from loyalty; 10) "I want to serve," from stewardship; and 11) "I get joy from what I do," from ownership.

Part of perceived control are the freedom and resources to make decisions and take actions. Only this freedom and these resources come from an external locus of control. Everything else comes from within the person. If you buy any of my eleven attributes and associated feelings in addition to the issue of freedom and resources, you must then believe a person can't empower another person. A person can only empower himself or herself. Empowerment isn't a state of being—"I am empowered." Empowerment is a state of feeling—"I feel empowered."

You can't empower a group any more than you can empower an individual. DOE can't empower STGWWG, no matter what their intent is. DOE can only support the group as the group empowers itself. We're in a new paradigm here. Empowerment isn't for the impatient or the uncaring.

STGWWG-type groups need to find empowerment in two directions: from their states, tribes, or associations to act as individuals and from the DOE to act as a group. Empowerment of a group is different from empowerment of an individual. For example, the individuals each may have self-confidence, but the collective group may not. Or, for another example, a person may trust his or her state, but not DOE or the other members of the group. I believe the attributes of an empowered group are the same as those for an empowered person. But, we're looking at collective (additive or multiplicative) variables, not individual ones.

#### **If DOE Doesn't Recognize the Inherent Variation in Stakeholders' Descriptions of DOE, They'll Feel Maligned**

The key word here is inherent. All actions carry variation. Any stakeholder group will voice opinions ranging from the negative to the positive, across a fairly wide range. Therefore, there will always be the most negative opinion and the most positive opinion. Variation is part of nature and we have to accept variation. Focusing on only the negative opinion to the point of being closed to hearing an opinion in the middle of the range (let alone the positive opinion) is dangerous. The wildly positive description of DOE is of no more import than the wildly negative description, except both extremes are necessary so we can get a middle. Both the middle of the range and the size of the range are valuable bits of information. You have to be able to set aside your ego to receive both the negative and positive comments equally and in such a way they both point toward the middle.

My experience with facilitating groups related to DOE and in many other circumstances is that when groups work together they end up at the most reasonable position—far from both extremes. If you don't trust the stakeholder group to obtain the best result, your overt or covert reaction to the *negative* end of the range of opinion will taint the group's work. DOE's culture and history come from an ego-based approach to the world.

Stakeholders' comments don't necessarily reflect attitude or potential behavior but are many different color threads woven into a multi-color fabric of participation in and understanding of the issues. DOE must deal with the fabric, not with individual threads, and especially not with threads of a color they don't like.

## CONCLUSIONS

STGWWG is one model for stakeholder involvement; and represents an important link in the chain of history for the way civilized people must address multifaceted national or international problems. We must learn all we can from the STGWWG experience if we are to move into a government that recognizes its customers and knows how to serve them.

STGWWG has made major contributions to the success and understanding of stakeholders groups. They initiated key advances on the part of DOE by stimulating the 30-year target for clean-up and by engendering DOE's recognition of the sovereignty of the Indian Nations. They broke ground in learning lessons about stakeholder groups.

The crux of a successful stakeholder group is resolving the issue of empowerment. For a STGWWG-type stakeholder group, we have four degrees of freedom: a two-directional, two-mode empowerment. One direction is from the state, tribe, or association; the other direction is from DOE. One mode is to feel empowered as a person; the other mode is to feel empowered as a group.

Techniques for empowerment are elusive. However, I believe a classic example technique is active listening. Until STGWWG members and DOE become skilled at active listening, they'll practice active talking to nobody's benefit.

The rest of what is needed for a successful stakeholder group is the scope of empowerment. Is STGWWG empowered to critique results or influence a process within DOE? What is the purpose of STGWWG? How can the facilitator support the group as each member expresses his or her views and as the group generates tangible evidence of accomplishment?

Many of the lessons are intertwined. For example, can you be empowered in a group where there's no constancy and consistency of purpose?

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