

Interdependence: Why We Need Each Other to Achieve Our Goals

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One of the first things I ask people engaged in a collaborative governance process is, “why”? Why would you voluntarily spend hours, sometimes over months or years, meeting with others who may have very different interests or values?

Often the first response is something like, “I’m trying to work out an agreement,” which while true, is not particularly instructive. I encourage people to go a little deeper and ask, “What is it that you specifically want or need from the others here at the table?” They may, for example, want the other party to change their position on an issue, or to agree not to take legal action. That level of specificity can by itself serve as a kind of compass for the discussions, to keep them focused.

But then I ask, “What is it that the other parties need or want from you?” This question sometimes elicits surprise, as if it were something new to think about. I remind them that everyone at the table could be doing other things with their time, so they must be expecting some positive value out of the collaborative process.

There are a number of potential follow-up questions and lines of discussion, but the real point of these questions is to help remind people of their interdependence with one another.

My colleagues and I at the National Policy Consensus Center were discussing interdependence last week, and its critical (though sometimes unstated) importance to the success of collaborative group process. The belief by some that collaborative governance brings people together who share a common goal is not necessarily true. What it does is bring people together who have intersecting goals.

In the case of collaborative projects where the goal is agreed upon, but no one party has the resources to implement it, the collaboration does involve shared interests or goals and the interdependence is more obvious. One party brings part of the money, one brings expertise, one brings volunteers needed, etc.

But collaborative process is often about reconciling two or more interests that intersect. Each group is looking for something, some action (or sometimes inaction) from others, often in the form of policy agreements or compromises. If they weren’t, there would be little reason to meet. Having the parties understand and acknowledge that interdependence is the first step in finding some common ground.

This can be challenging, one of my colleagues said, because of the common fallacy of independence. Many, especially in the west, see independence as the ideal. Rich people put the gates up to keep others out of their community. The United States and Western Europe decide to not get involved in the Syrian conflict, thinking they won’t be affected. Senior citizens vote against increasing school budgets, and then wonder why the crime rate is so high.

The philosophers say that everything is connected. Understanding those connections can provide fertile ground for cooperation and agreement. A few years ago, it was an environmental attorney with a history of litigating proposed

timber harvest who provided a key role in keeping a rural lumber mill open. She saw that the goals of her group were linked to that mill staying in operation.

Those who understand how our futures and interests are linked are more fully equipped to get a better outcome for themselves at the collaborative table. Wallace Stegner wrote, "When (the West) fully learns that cooperation, not rugged individualism, is the quality that most characterizes and preserves it, then...it has a chance to create a society to match its scenery."