



E-PARCC

COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE INITIATIVE

Syracuse University

Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs

Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration

City Park: Community Collaboration and Rotating Facilitator Exercise Teaching Note

The City Park exercise provides students an opportunity to both participate in a collaborative problem-solving process and practice facilitating a meeting as part of a collaborative problem-solving process.

The simulation requires a minimum of five participants and can be used in classes or training sessions of just about any number of participants. Large groups can be broken up into groups of 5-7. Ideally each group of 5-7 has a coach to observe the sessions and lead short debriefing discussions after each session.

The simulation spans five meetings of an ad hoc working group put together by the city council to explore options for the future of a city park. Running the simulation over five meetings provides the participants the opportunity to each take a turn to facilitate (or co-facilitate) one meeting while still pursuing their stakeholder interests.

We believe this is advantageous over the typical scenario of having an “outside facilitator” – someone who does not have a stake in the outcome. Using such an external facilitator means the stakeholder participants miss out on the experience of having to facilitate a group. In this simulation participants experience what it is like to both participate in and facilitate collaborative problem solving.

This simulation was a winner in our 2011-12 “Collaborative Public Management, Collaborative Governance, and Collaborative Problem Solving” teaching case and simulation competition. It was double-blind peer reviewed by a committee of academics and practitioners. It was written by John B. Stephens and Ricardo S. Morse of the University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill. This case is intended for classroom discussion and is not intended to suggest either effective or ineffective handling of the situation depicted. It is brought to you by E-PARCC, part of the Maxwell School of Syracuse University’s Collaborative Governance Initiative, a subset of the Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration (PARCC). This material may be copied as many times as needed as long as the authors are given full credit for their work.

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The other advantage of having five meetings is that it allows for a more realistic simulation of a collaborative problem-solving process of a complex issue with various stakeholder perspectives. By having multiple meetings, facilitators and participants can focus on various aspects of collaborative problem-solving in a step-by-step manner rather than try to rush through all of the steps in one session. Thus all participants (and the facilitators or co-facilitators for each meeting) can better explore critical skills such as establishing ground rules, identifying interests, brainstorming options, seeking creative trade-offs, coming to agreement, and so on.

Information and Roles

The simulation packet includes the general information and accompanying map for all participants. The map shows current features of the park, and changes proposed by one stakeholder.

Next there are seven roles with each participant receiving one role “for their eyes only.”

The five essential roles are

- 1) Assistant city manager,
- 2) Representative of West Rock Neighborhood,
- 3) President of East Creek Estates Neighborhood Association,
- 4) Spokesperson, of the Parkside Merchants Association, and
- 5) Vice-Chair of the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board.

If the simulation group has six or seven members, two additional roles of 6) Chair of the Rockmont Greenway Committee and 7) Spokesperson, Rocky Branch Church are available.

The simulation and roles are flexible and adaptable.

- a) At minimum, five participants could work as a small working group with each facilitating one of the five meetings on their own.
- b) If a group has six members, two can co-facilitate one of the meetings.
- c) A group of seven could have two meetings co-facilitated.
- d) Another variation involves a core group of participants (students, who practice facilitating one of the meetings), plus additional group members that do not facilitate (e.g., volunteers who assist by playing a role).

Meeting Structure: Skills to Develop and Group Objectives

The recommended outline of meetings (with exercise materials) shows the desired outcomes for each meeting and accompanying facilitation skills that come into focus during that meeting. The five meeting set up is amenable to a variety of training settings. In a traditional classroom environment where various collaborative decision making skills are taught over the course of a unit or even semester, the schedule of the five meetings could be spread out to correspond with material that will be most helpful to observe or practice in that meeting. Having that amount of time between meetings also allows participants to do “in-between work” (e.g. coalition building) that would not occur if the simulation is conducted on one day.

If the setting is a training workshop, the next training option is to have a short period of instruction on the specific facilitation skills emphasized in the upcoming meeting, then immediately have participants “try out” those skills in the meeting. Alternatively, the five meetings could be done in succession, after explanation (and possibly brief demonstration) of all the relevant skills.

Debriefing

A key ingredient of a successful simulation experience with the City Park scenario is having debriefing sessions after each meeting. This allows participants to reflect on what they just experienced, and focuses learning about process and facilitation skills while it is fresh on their minds.

Coaches (see attached “Coaches Guide” and debriefing questions for coaches only) can also offer timely feedback. It also allows for discussions of any needed course corrections in terms of how people are playing their roles. Note: If coaches are not available for each simulation group, the “debriefing questions” handout could still be used by participants who could be asked to step out of their role to conduct their own debrief at the end of each meeting. However, it is much more effective to have an “outside observer” coach with each group.]

The “skills and outcomes” document that accompanies the introduction, map, and roles, should serve as a guide to the five meetings. It is adaptable, however, and instructors can modify outcomes and skills as needed to fit their training needs.

Final Debrief

An effective simulation also includes a final debrief at the end. Suggested discussion questions for an overall debrief include:

1. What were effective techniques for balancing the facilitator and stakeholder roles?
2. Which “facilitative skills” can any stakeholder use?
3. What behaviors or events in the group built understanding and trust? What contributed to confusion and/or distrust?
4. How well did the group do in seeking solutions that met the stakeholders’ interests? What factors contributed to progress/barriers to consensus?

5. Does the City Park exercise on balancing the facilitator and stakeholder roles apply to your expectations in working with groups? If so, how?
6. Which aspects of “real life” collaboration does the exercise address? What aspects does it not address?

Potential Background Readings

The following, or excerpts from the following, are useful in communicating the concepts and skills related to collaborative problem-solving that are emphasized in this exercise.

Fisher, Roger, William Ury and Bruce Patton. 1991. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* (2nd ed). New York: Penguin Books.

Heifetz, Ronald A., and Marty Linsky. 2002. *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Kaner, Sam with Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger. 2007. *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Linden, Russell M. 2010. *Leading Across Boundaries: Creating Collaborative Agencies in a Networked World*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Straus, David. 2002. *How to Make Collaboration Work: Powerful Ways to Build Consensus, Solve Problems, and Make Decisions*. San Francisco: Berrett-Kohler.