

Chapter 10

Success/Failure of Watershed Councils

So, you made it through the start-up phase. You created some kind of watershed partnership that is up and running, with members, a mission statement, an organizational and decision-making structure and perhaps some start-up or even ongoing project funding. You've completed a watershed assessment and used it to create an action plan with goals, objectives and specific tasks. But how do you make sure that your group has longevity within the community?

The University of Arizona's *Partnership Handbook* provides a list of characteristics of successful partnerships. If you refer to this list and feel like most of the criteria are being met in your watershed group, then there is a good chance the group will stay together and be able to do good work. If these criteria are not being met or don't have a high probability of being met in the near future, then you may want to reconsider the time you're spending working within the coalition group.



Characteristics of a successful partnership include:

- Membership is purposefully broad. Typical partners include government agencies, nonprofit organizations, professional societies, corporations, landowners, and private citizens. A common guideline for partnership groups is “involve everyone.”
- Partnerships enhance land use and natural resource management by drawing expertise and input from a wide range of individuals and groups who live in and intimately know the resource base and the local economy. Partnerships use communication as the primary tool to solve problems and reach agreements. Effective communication improves everyone's understanding of the issues and each other's needs and concerns and can thereby reduce conflict.
- By generating a commonly shared vision for natural resources and local communities, partnerships build long-term support, which can improve project implementation. By involving

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the public more fully in planning and decision-making, partnerships increase personal levels of responsibility, involvement, and commitment. Decision-making is collaborative. Decisions are usually made by consensus, to ensure that everyone's needs and concerns have been addressed. By working to address everyone's concerns, partnership groups often come up with more creative and generally acceptable decisions.

- Partnerships improve on-the-ground management by pooling resources of several organizations, agencies, and individuals. Pooling resources provides various benefits; for example, volunteer involvement may increase and a broader base of financial support can be drawn upon.

If interest and motivation for forming a partnership are high, and if all the key affected and interested parties are willing to commit to a partnership for the long haul, the partnership has a good chance of success.

Unfortunately, not all partnerships will achieve the benefits described above. For every success story, there is another story of too much time spent in meetings, discussing and arguing with one another without achieving any tangible results. Most organizations cycle in and out of difficult times, during which they will experience one or more of the following warning signs. That's part of the natural life cycle of non-profit or volunteer organizations. But if you find your group suffering from some combination of these symptoms for too long, it's a sign that group members should take a hard look at the relative costs and benefits of the partnership.

Warning signs include:

- History of unresolved conflict among key interests
- Lack of clear purpose
- Unrealistic goals
- Key interests or decision-makers not included or refusing to participate
- Not all participants stand to benefit from the partnership
- Partnership is not equitable - some entities have more power than others
- Partnership is not needed because one entity could achieve the goals alone.

In another take on the topic of success or failure of partnership groups, the *Partnership Handbook* identifies three factors that differentiate successful efforts from not-so-successful ones:

Commitment – members’ integrity and leadership qualities;

Communication – discussion, listening, and facilitation;

Organization – setting ground rules for communication, decision-making, meeting structure, and record-keeping.

The *Partnership Handbook* points out that partnerships usually bring adversarial partners together to deal with contentious issues. Overcoming differences to work toward a common goal requires an incredible commitment of time and effort from everyone involved. A successful partnership, then, demands integrity, honesty, openness, and respect; good and clear communication of expectations, beliefs, feelings; and strong organization, including organizational structure, from all group members.

In some cases, groups find it useful to develop guidelines for participation in meetings and decisions. Many of these guidelines may be familiar to you if you’ve attended any kind of facilitated stakeholder meeting recently.

Some groups also find it helpful to have a neutral facilitator to help guide the discussion, keep the group on track, and enforce both participation guidelines and time limits on discussion items. It can be difficult for a member or staff person to serve as facilitator, since to be effective, they have to remain neutral in the discussion. You lose one of your stakeholder voices if you assign the facilitation role to someone internally.

The *Partnership Handbook* offers a number of criteria for helping evaluate the effectiveness of a facilitator, which can also be useful to others in the group in terms of reinforcing appropriate meeting behavior. These include:

Maintaining neutrality

Keeping meetings focused

Using active listening techniques

Acknowledging participants’ feelings and behavior

Stating a problem in a constructive way

Suggesting procedures or problem-solving approaches when needed

Guidelines for participation in partnership groups:

- ✓ Express intentions honestly and openly
- ✓ Respect the views and interests of others
- ✓ Do not make disparaging remarks about others – address the issue, not the person
- ✓ Listen first – especially to those with whom you have the least agreement
- ✓ Avoid side conversations
- ✓ Stay on topic when speaking to the group
- ✓ Avoid redundancy; use “ditto” to indicate your agreement with what has been said, rather than re-stating it
- ✓ Avoid dominating the discussion; let others have their say
- ✓ Ask for clarification if you do not understand something that has been said
- ✓ Honor time limits set for discussion items
- ✓ Commit to staying for the duration of the meeting, rather than leaving early
- ✓ Participate fully
- ✓ Do what you say you will do.

Summarizing and clarifying discussions

Avoiding behaviors such as: judging or criticizing ideas or values of others, projecting own ideas, making procedural decisions without consulting participants, etc.

Cultivating behaviors such as: giving praise, maintaining a positive attitude, treating everyone equally, respecting others' opinions, etc.

In addition to using an outside facilitator, you want to be sure that everyone participating understands the ground rules for their participation. For example, rules and procedures regarding meeting attendance, confidentiality, delegation of responsibility, relationship to other groups, decision-making structure, etc., should be codified in some kind of written document and then adopted by the group.

The Yuba Watershed Council plans to have each member read and sign its operating procedures document as part of the membership requirement (see sample, pgs. 115-116). That way, if someone is having a problem complying with the agreed-upon rules, the group has some recourse. A set of meeting ground rules will be posted at every meeting so that anyone coming in, either on the Council or as an interested member of the public, will be governed by the same rules.

The Conservation Technology Information Center's "Know Your Watershed" program also outlines its keys to successful partnerships in its *Building Local Partnerships* brochure.

Keys to Successful Partnerships

Establish a sense of need and direction –

All partners need to know they're working toward a worthwhile purpose. They also need to know what is expected of them.

Select partners based on existing and potential skills, not personalities – Partnerships will need technical or communications, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills.

Pay particular attention to the early meetings and activities – First impressions mean a lot. People are often skeptical at the first meeting and may be suspicious of other partners.

Set some ground rules – The group will probably need to set some specific ground rules related to meeting participation, discussion, confidentiality, constructive feedback, and expected contributions.

Start with a few short-term tasks that have a good chance for success – Be sure that early projects are realistic and will be seen as “winners” in the eyes of the partners.

Challenge the group regularly with fresh facts and information – New information (that you will be gathering as a partnership) will help [your group] better understand your situation and improve your effectiveness.

Spend time together – It will take time to get the partnership working effectively. Spend time (outside of meetings, if possible) to get to know each other.

Use the power of positive feedback, recognition, and reward – People respond to positive incentives in the partnership setting just as they do as individuals.

Everyone has his or her own ideas about what constitutes success of an organization. Definitions will probably vary even within your own group. But the bottom line is, if you follow the guidance in this and other handbooks for starting up partnership groups, including involving the appropriate mix of people, building a common vision and purpose, setting attainable goals, and establishing good communication among member groups and the members and the community, chances are your group will enjoy a long and productive life. That is our hope for each of you.



CHAPTER 10 - KEY CONTACTS/REFERENCE/RESOURCES

Building Local Partnerships: A Guide for Watershed Partnerships, published by the Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) as part of its “Know Your Watershed” program. You can reach the “Know Your Watershed” program at 1220 Potter Drive, Room 170, W. Lafayette, IN 47906-1383. Tel: 765-494-9555. Fax: 765-494-5969.

Starting Up: A Handbook for New River and Watershed Organizations. Published by River Network, PO Box 8787, Portland, OR 97207-8787. Tel: 503-241-9256. Fax: 503-241-9256. Website: <http://www.rivernetwork.org>. 1996

Partnership Handbook, compiled by Ann Moote for the University of Arizona’s Water Resources Research Center. College of Agriculture, University of Arizona, 350 N. Campbell Avenue, Tucson, AZ 85719. Can be downloaded from the Internet at: <http://ag.arizona.edu/PARTNERS/>

**SAMPLE WATERSHED COUNCIL
OPERATING PROCEDURES**

ARTICLE I – NAME AND ORGANIZATION

Section 1: Name. This organization is called _____.

ARTICLE II – VISION AND MISSION

Section 1: Vision. The _____ [watershed council name] envisions a watershed that is biologically diverse, productive and sustainable, containing:

- rivers, streams and lakes that flow clear and clean, are free from pollution, and support healthy aquatic and riparian ecosystems;
- a landscape that reflects a diversity of terrestrial ecosystems and provides habitat to support healthy fish, wildlife and plant communities;
- a viable socioeconomic environment.

Section 2: Mission. The _____ [watershed council name] is a community forum of stakeholders which is taking the initiative to:

- better appreciate the complex watershed relationships in the _____ watershed and its environs;
- protect, restore and enhance watershed resources where needed;
- maintain a sustainable watershed resource base for future generations.

In addressing social, economic, and environmental concerns in the watershed, Council members will cooperate and coordinate with one another, while respecting the mission, roles, and rights of each entity.

Section 3: Functions.

- Assess potential issues of importance in the watershed and bring to the group for consideration;
- Help coordinate efforts or activities of individual members and interests involved in the watershed and/or partner with individual organizations on specific watershed-related projects;
- Represent and provide balance of diverse interests in reviewing and prioritizing proposed watershed projects or issues of concern;
- Identify and coordinate joint applications for public and private funding for research, planning, and implementation, and long-term monitoring programs supported by the Council;
- Provide oversight and resources, as necessary and appropriate, for the administration of grants received and projects undertaken in the name of the Council;
- Serve as an educational resource and central informational clearinghouse and networking hub for individuals and groups with projects or interests in the watershed or those with general concerns about watershed issues;
- Help break down barriers and enhance relationships between agencies and between agencies, stakeholders and the rest of the community.

ARTICLE III – MEMBERSHIP

Section 1: Eligibility. Any individual or organization who a.) has attended at least three meetings, b.) has read and agreed with the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) as indicated by signing the Memorandum, and c.) who wishes to actively support the mission and vision of the _____ [watershed council name] is invited to become a voting member.

Section 2: Suspension or Termination. Voting membership in the _____ [watershed council name] will be suspended or terminated for the following causes:

- a. voluntary resignation;
- b. willful misconduct or disregard for or violation of the terms of the Operating Procedures.

Section 3: Nondiscrimination. The _____ [watershed council name] will not discriminate nor restrict membership because of race, color, creed, national origin, sex, age, religion, citizenship, or physical handicap.

ARTICLE IV – MEETINGS

Section 1: Meetings. Regular meetings of the _____ [watershed council name] are held on the _____ [day] of each month from _____ [time] unless otherwise scheduled.

Section 2: Notice of Meeting. A meeting notice and agenda are mailed to each member the week prior to the meeting. In lieu of this written notice, special meetings may be set by agreement at any regularly convened _____ [watershed council name] meeting.

Section 3: Quorum. The presence of at least 50% + 1 of current members in good standing, as indicated by their signatures on the MOU, is required to constitute a quorum for decision-making purposes.

Section 4: Voting. The _____ [watershed council name] strives to operate by consensus. But in the event a vote is necessary, a 2/3 majority is required for action. Any member in good standing is entitled to participate in consensus decisions and/or votes at any meeting of the _____ [watershed council name].

Section 5: Proxies. Voting by proxy shall be permitted.

ARTICLE V – COUNCIL OFFICERS

Section 1: Officers. The _____ [watershed council name] will elect a chair, vice chair and secretary.

Term of Office. The term of all _____ [watershed council name] officers is one year. An officer must be a member in good standing of the _____ [watershed council name]. Officers will be elected at the January meeting and will take office at the February meeting. There is no limit on the number of consecutive terms any officer may serve.

ARTICLE VI – FINANCIAL AND ACCOUNTING

[Specific to each group.]

ARTICLE VII – AMENDMENTS

Section 1: Amendments. This governance structure may be amended, repealed or altered by consensus decision at any duly organized meeting of the _____ [watershed council name], provided notice of the proposed change(s) is included in the agenda and meeting notice prior to the meeting.