WORKING TOGETHER

A series for people working together in groups

Dealing with Stumbling Blocks

F. Conway

Americans are independent people. Yet at times we need to work together to find solutions to issues facing our communities. Working in a group may not feel natural at first. But when we realize a task is bigger than anyone can do alone, we join together to get the job done.

Keep in mind that although the members of your group share a common interest and commitment, they see things from a variety of perspectives and positions. Your group is bound to stumble from time to time. All groups do, and it's a normal part of the group development process.

Working together can be productive, creative, effective, and fun (believe it or not!) despite the unnatural way it feels or the challenges that come up. The key is to realize that stumbling is normal and to not let the occasional stumbles derail your group's entire effort.

The other publications in this series discuss creating successful partnerships, choosing an organizational structure, holding effective meetings, making group decisions, and communicating effectively. In each publication, some common perils are introduced.

In this publication, 10 of the most common stumbling blocks are described. If your group is running into problems, this publication can help you identify exactly what the problem is and find solutions. In many cases, it refers you to another publication for more information and specific strategies to deal with the stumbling block.

IN THIS PUBLICATION YOU'LL LEARN:

- Ten stumbling blocks common to many groups
- Key ways to overcome each of these stumbling blocks
- Why stumbling happens
- How to go with the flow and not give up

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OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION SERVICE

"In no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used, or applied to a greater multitude of objects, than in America."

Alexis de Tocqueville
Democracy in America

De Tocqueville wrote this observation in 1831. Some things haven't changed.

We all belong to groups. De Tocqueville called them "associations," but yours could be a council, committee, commission, delegation, alliance, club, lodge, union, partnership, organization, or coalition. It could be voluntary or professional, advisory or governing, official or casual.

Whatever it's called, and however it's con-figured, a group is made up of people working together on what's important to them. The publications in this series (see page 16 for a list) are designed to help members of a group be more effective. Do they work? We think so. After all, we work together in groups too.

#1–CONFLICT

Most groups are made up of people with many different ideas and feelings. Wherever people live and work together, conflict exists. In fact, a good definition of conflict is "a natural tension that arises from differences."

One of the most common misperceptions or misunderstandings about conflict is that it always is a negative experience. In fact, conflict has at least three benefits: it produces energy, it can make you feel alive, and it can remind us of our interconnectedness. Ultimately, a conflict that is worked with and through can bring about very positive results.

The key to managing or transforming conflict is to understand and use three basic concepts:

1. The common causes of conflict are:

- Avoidance of conflict
- Unwillingness to express feelings and thoughts directly or clearly
- Need to be right

When you're involved in a conflict, ask yourself these questions:

- "Am I avoiding this conflict unnecessarily?" Most people, out of fear or habit, tend to change to be like the other. It might be easier in the long run to deal with the problem now, before it turns into something bigger.

- "Am I directly expressing how I feel or think?" Take a minute to stop, collect your thoughts, and share them clearly and directly with the individual or the group.

- "Is it really that important to me to be right?" Often we forget that both sides of a conflict might be right. A time of conflict is an important time to practice active listening and the principle "Everyone has a piece of the truth." By doing so, you may find out that others are as "right" in their truths as you are in yours!

2. *Your personal history with conflict affects how you react to it.*

Successfully managing conflict requires moving beyond past emotional experiences with conflict and learning new skills to deal with it well.

One way to do this is to recognize–first in yourself and then in others–the difference between positions and interests. In conflicts, people often voice their positions. They state their "stand" and then "dig in" on what seem to be two or more drastically opposing sides. Once a discussion or interaction gets stuck on positions, no deeper understanding or resolution occurs. On the other hand, when interests–the myriad beliefs and values that underlie positions–are explored and communicated, similarities can be noticed and built upon to acknowledge or create common ground.

3. *Ironically, communication, or the lack of it, can get your group into conflicts, but it also is the only thing that can get you through conflict.*

You'll need strong communication skills to manage all types of conflicts. (See EC 1510, Effective Communication, for specifics.)

Conflicts will come and go throughout the life of your group. Remembering the concepts above can change how you respond to a conflict situation.

The communication skills presented in EC 1510 will help you make it through most conflicts on your own. There are times, however, when a neutral third party can be really helpful. Don't hesitate to call in someone to fill this role (for example, a mediator) if and when you or your group feels it's necessary.

#2–FACTS, MYTHS, UNKNOWNS, AND VALUES

To understand or confront important issues, people often break them down into parts. It's always easier to deal with life in bite-sized pieces. Problems often occur, however, when different people break an issue down into different elements. What one person calls a "fact" another calls a "myth" or a "value." Unknowns pose even more problems because most of us feel vulnerable admitting what we don't know. And so begins the difference of opinion or perspective, sometimes eventually leading to a full-blown conflict.

To begin dealing with this stumbling block, let's look at some definitions and examples:

- Fact: a statement of what is. It is verifiable and supported by evidence.

  > "Water runs downhill."

  > "The sun rises in the east and sets in the west."

- Myth: a falsehood, treated as if it were a fact. A notion based more on tradition or convenience than on fact.

  > "Girls don't do well in math."

  > "Certain ethnic groups are better at sports or engineering."

- Unknown: a statement that is ambiguous or characterized by great uncertainty. All statements are uncertain to some degree, but the degree of uncertainty may be important in resolving issues. Unknowns often are treated as facts.

  > "There is life on other planets."
  > "Oregon will have a major earthquake within the next 10 years."

- Values: statements of preferred end results or outcomes. Value statements can't be proven right or wrong, and they often differ among interest groups and individuals.

  > "We can't trust government to clean up the environment."
  > "Every American deserves a job."

The first thing to do in increasing understanding or managing any conflict about an issue is to deal with facts, myths, unknowns, and values. Here are a few tools to help you wade through the turbulence and confusion:

- Use the above definitions to clarify facts, myths, values, and unknowns. This step helps you deal directly with a situation where someone is using an unknown or a myth as a fact. Unknowns and myths aren't inherently bad, and facts aren't inherently good–they're just different and shouldn't be used interchangeably. When possible, destroy myths and replace them with facts or unknowns.

- Anticipate and accept value differences. Compare perspectives on the issue and focus the discussion on the most "productive" differences–those that can be built upon to create a stronger, more stable outcome.

- Recognize your own values. Articulate your own myths and unknowns about various aspects of the issue.
- Support the orderly formation of policy alternatives based on this new, clarified discussion of the issue.

Remember, this process isn't magic. It's not going to make a world filled with gray areas turn into one with clear and concise black and white areas. Nor should it. Frankly, the grays are what make life interesting. This process will, however, help you interact with others in your group in ways that let you be true to yourself and clear about what you believe, value, know, and don't know.

#3–RESOURCES AND BARRIERS

When groups talk about resources as a stumbling block, they usually are talking about the lack of enough financial resources. There are a couple of key points to remember when dealing with this stumbling block, and they both have to do with "who" rather than "how much."

For example, who is either on your group or in some way a supporter of its mission? What are their resources? Don't think only of their financial resources, but also in terms of their ability to access funds and other means of support. Do they have grant-writing or other fund-raising experience? Do they have experience in generating support for projects?

Don't get stuck on the concept of money; there also are other "currencies" that can be resources–for example, energy, time, tools, community contacts, political contacts, technical or administrative expertise, and so on. It might be worthwhile to do a brief assessment of your group members and ask these questions:

- What do we need?
- Who's here?
- Who's missing that could help?

Other barriers may be legal, social, economic, or technical. Once again, do a brief assessment. Using the other publications in this series as guides, determine where the barrier is. Is it internal–in your organizational structure, how meetings are managed, how decisions are made (or not made), etc.? Is it external–are you communicating poorly with the public or with decision makers, violating laws or regulations, or in some other way not fully grasping the external factors affecting your group (for example, endangered species regulations)?

> Unknowns and myths aren't inherently bad, and facts aren't inherently good—they're just different and shouldn't be used interchangeably.

Systematically look at each level, identify your group's weaknesses and the threats facing you, and find ways to change as many as possible into strengths and opportunities. The idea is to exhaust every possibility about how to get through, over, under, or around. . . before you even consider stopping.

#4–COVERT AGENDAS

Covert agendas usually come up if a group has stumbled during the development of its partnership or group structure, or has a lack of clarity around group processes, meetings management, and communication protocols (see the other publications in this series). Sometimes people leave things muddled on purpose, and the lack of clarity and inclusiveness makes it easier to carry out concealed, self-serving plans. But most often, unintentional confusion constructs an environment in which unwarranted paranoia creeps up that "some type of covert agenda is going on here."

The keys to keeping either imaginary or real covert agendas from happening are in the other publications in this series:

- Be deliberate about your partnership–take the time to get and keep the appropriate people involved (see EC 1506).
- Learn about possible organizational structures and pick one that works for your group, given your members' geographic region, vision, mission, and goals (see EC 1507).
- Keep your vision, mission, and goals visible, so everyone can help keep your activities guided toward them (see EC 1507).
- Cultivate skilled participants and leaders (see EC 1506).
- Build the decision-making and communication skills necessary to keep yourselves going along efficiently and effectively (see EC 1509 and EC 1510).

By cultivating an environment where trust and respect can exist among different viewpoints and perspectives, you'll be able to overcome this stumbling block if and when it happens.

#5–DECISION MAKING OUTSIDE OF MEETINGS

It's especially easy to fall into this trap in the early stages of a group's life. During this time, trust has not developed, and protocols, structures, and agreements don't exist yet. Although it's usually not intentional, members talk outside of meetings and forget they're not the only ones with opinions or perspectives.

These "decisions" can be treated as if they were made by the larger group, thereby leaving others "out." When this happens intentionally, it can splinter a group and damage relationships.

It's easy to paint a picture with only three or four colors, but it rarely has the depth or beauty that one with 20 colors might have. Typically, diverse members bring challenges to the group, but they also bring different skills and viewpoints that ultimately strengthen the group. Making decisions outside the group means some of these skills and viewpoints are left out.

The keys to preventing this problem are clearly defined in EC 1508, Effective Meetings Management, and EC 1509, Decision Making. In the first meeting, raise this issue and make a temporary or permanent ground rule related to decision making. Then, as soon as possible, agree upon a clear group decision-making process. Also refer to EC 1510, Effective Communication, and the importance of clear internal and external commun-ication protocols.

Make sure this problem isn't ignored. Talk about it openly. Remember, people are less likely to meet group expectations when they don't know what they are.

> Typically, diverse members bring challenges to the group, but they also bring different skills and viewpoints that ultimately strengthen the group.

#6–GROUP MEMBERS NOT TAKING OWNERSHIP OF THE GROUP PROCESS

Remember, although you might have a convener who calls meetings and a facilitator who manages them, all members play a part in helping your group work well or causing it to fall apart.

Good group meetings, or any other situations where people come together to accomplish or learn something, have four things in common:

- They have a clear purpose.
- They're well organized and effectively handled so all participants can share, learn, and teach.
- They encourage all participants to share, learn, and teach.
- Participants leave feeling that they gained something from the experience and were encouraged to give something to others.

In EC 1506, Creating Successful Partnerships, and EC 1507, Choosing a Structure, Mission, and Goals, you can learn about roles and responsibilities as related to content–who needs to be part of your group and why. In EC 1508, Meetings Management, you can learn about roles and responsibilities as related to process–

who does what and when. If your group is running up against this stumbling block, it would be a good idea to review these publications. Serious problems in group process may require the effort to stop the topical discussion and revisit basics such as process, bylaws, etc.

The key to dealing with this stumbling block is knowing what makes good group members–with regard to both content and process. There is nothing more fun and functional than to have the entire group understand and appreciate good group process enough to challenge themselves, each other, or the facilitator if a ground rule is broken or the environment becomes suspicious.
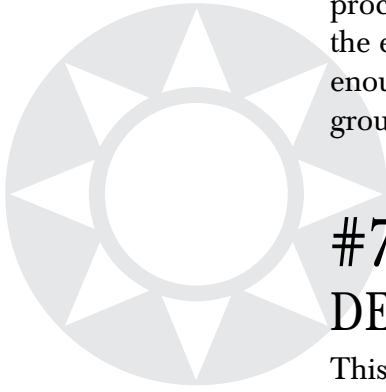
#7–LACK OF CLARITY REGARDING DECISIONS

This stumbling block is similar to, but not exactly the same as, #5 (decision making outside of meetings). It feels different and rarely is premeditated. When agreements or decisions aren't made clearly or documented in group memory or minutes, one of two things happens: either the topic is repeated at meetings or, worse, decisions are remade outside the group and denied later. Fortunately, like most stumbling blocks, taking the time and energy to form, or reform, clear structure and protocols really alleviates this problem.

The keys to doing just that are clearly defined in the other publications in this series. Having a clear organizational structure and effective meetings management is the beginning. Add to that a clear understanding of how decisions will be made, and you'll have a framework to keep your group from stumbling over this problem. Any member of the group can help with this vital function by keeping track of whether or not decisions are clearly stated and recorded. At the very least, you will be able to pick yourselves up, dust off your knees, and keep from stumbling over this one again.

#8–POLITICS AND HISTORY OF WORKING TOGETHER

Labels such as "it's the ol' boys club," or "that's the tree-huggers group," or any number of others are used to describe this impediment to good group work. If you've never run into this problem before, consider yourselves delusional, blessed, or both. Many groups have people that "are used to working together" or represent only one aspect of an issue. Although it might seem

easier at first to work only with people you're comfortable with, this approach causes many groups to run into trouble or ultimately fail.

Effective groups are effective because they have members that represent all aspects of the issue. When you're seeking members, ask yourselves, "What benefit/drawback will this person(s) have in relation to our purpose?"

As mentioned earlier, diverse members typically bring challenges to the group. But they also bring different skills and viewpoints that ultimately strengthen the group by helping it reach a broader audience, get the attention of new or different elected officials, or gain access to needed resources. Good group processes and a clear group mission help keep all members–no matter how diverse–on track.

The keys to avoiding this stumbling block are found in EC 1506 and EC 1507. In addition, look around at other groups that have weathered the tests of time. You may be able to get some ideas from them to help your group successfully blend a variety of viewpoints.

> ✴ When you're seeking members, ask yourselves "what benefit/drawback will this person(s) have in relation to our purpose?"

#9–RULES, REGULATIONS, AND BUREAUCRACIES

Legal stumbling blocks also can get in the way of working collaboratively. A few are listed briefly below. When in doubt about whether your group is affected by one of these laws or regulations, stop and find out for sure!

Antitrust laws, designed to protect a competitive market, don't exactly foster collaboration. These laws are more of a problem for private commodity groups and corporations, but it's a good idea for your group to learn about what you can and can't discuss or agree to.

FACA, or the Federal Advisory Committee Act, limits the types of input from federal agencies and their participation in partnership groups. FACA essentially defines advisory groups as any group that a federal agency consults before making management or regulatory decisions. Under FACA, advisory groups must follow specific procedures, including formally announcing meetings and opening all meetings to the public.

Some people have interpreted FACA as prohibiting agencies from taking advice from partnership groups that are not formal advisory committees under FACA. If your group includes one or more federal agencies, you should be aware of FACA and follow its prescriptions for advisory committees unless directly told not

to. Consult with agency representatives about how FACA relates to your group.

To deal with these legal constraints, and others related to rules and regulations, do some research and read carefully any publications that address these issues. Your best chance at not stumbling, or recovering from a stumble, is to know what you face.

#10–If not your group, then who?

The pitfall of trying to do it all yourself is ever-present. If you've read and followed the principles in the other publications in this series and you run into a task your group can't do or a problem you can't solve, ask yourselves, "Who else can, could, or should be doing this?"

There are many reasons why some tasks may not be appropriate for your group to undertake. Maybe key research or technology doesn't exist yet or isn't available to your group. Maybe an activity would make local people uncomfortable. Maybe the problem needs to be looked at from multiple perspectives (e.g., economic, workforce, environmental, developmental, etc.). Saddling yourself with impossible tasks creates frustration that could have been avoided.

Here's an example. Your group is laying out, or periodically revisiting, your area's master plan. As you focus on several projects, you notice some parts of the projects require technical expertise that just doesn't exist in your cadre of volunteers, etc.

You realize that you'll have to contract out these parts of the projects, but to whom? Do you want to just design the project contract and award it to the lowest bidder? Or do you want to set up clear design and contracting procedures that result in good work and sustain high-skill, high-wage work for the local workforce?

The key to avoiding this and other "if not us, who?" situations is to not get tunnel vision. Even if you've done a remarkable job at getting lots of different people involved in your group, you're still only part of the world at large. Maybe a good part, but only one part. Take the time to "look up and out the window" every now and then. With careful thought, multiple objectives can be accomplished and multiple rewards achieved.

✪ Summary/self review

It's a fact that stumbling happens, and the best way to cope with it is to go with the flow and not give up. In this publication, we discussed 10 of the common stumbling blocks that groups face and some key ways to overcome them. The following checklist will remind you of the key points in this publication and will help you see where your group may need to do some work to miss, or overcome, some common stumbling blocks in working together:

1. Conflict

☐ Do you and other members of your group feel that conflict is natural, or do you avoid it at all costs?

☐ Can you and others members of your group say what the common causes of conflict are (hint! the need to be right, the lack of direct expression, and the avoidance of conflict)?

☐ Do you know what type of skills are needed to manage all types of conflicts?

2. Facts, myths, unknowns, and values

☐ Breaking issues down into bite-sized elements can help you confront or understand them. Can you and other members of your group delineate and clarify facts, myths, values, and unknowns?

☐ Are you and other members of your group ready and willing to destroy myths and replace them with facts or unknowns?

☐ Do you and other members of your group anticipate and legitimize value differences?

☐ Do you and other members of your group recognize your own values and ethics; articulate your own myths and unknowns; and support the formulation of alternatives based on this new, clarified discussion of the issue?

3. Resources and barriers

☐ Can you and other members of your group briefly assess and clarify your group's resources and barriers?

☐ Do you and other members of your group think of resources in terms of various currencies (not just economic)?

☐ Are you and other members of your group ready or willing to figure out whether each barrier is internal or external, and to exhaust every possibility about how to get through, over, under, or around it?

4. Covert agendas

☐ Do you and other members of your group know how to prevent covert agendas from happening (hint! be deliberate about your partnership; pick an organizational structure that works; cultivate a group of participants and leaders with the skills needed to keep the group going along effectively)?

5. Decision making outside of meetings

☐ Do you know how to prevent this problem?

☐ Has your group made a temporary or permanent ground rule related to decision making?

☐ Does your group have a clear and agreed-upon group decision-making process?

6. Group members not taking ownership of the group process

☐ Are you and other members of your group clear–both with regard to content and to process–about what makes a good group member? Are you committed to this?

7. Lack of clarity regarding decisions

☐ Has your group taken the time and energy to form, or reform, clear structure and protocols?

☐ Does your group have a clear organizational structure and effective meetings management?

☐ Do you and other members of your group have a clear understanding of how decisions will be made and why?

8. Politics and history of working together

☐ Does your group have members that represent all interests related to the issue the group is facing?

☐ Is your group made up of people who share a common interest and commitment, but have a variety of perspectives and positions?

9. Rules, regulations, and bureaucracies

☐ Does your group operate under the rule of thumb: "When in doubt, stop and check it out"?

☐ Are you and other members of your group willing to always check with the "powers that be" to learn what you should and should not discuss or agree to?

10. If not your group, then who?

☐ Are you and other members of your group willing–if you come up with a task or problem you can't do, solve, or figure out–to research who else could or should be doing it?
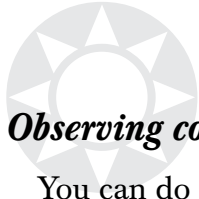
Exercises

Observing conflict

You can do this exercise on your own or as a group.

Most of us feel uncomfortable and unskilled at managing conflict. This exercise will give you a chance to practice listening–both externally and internally. Through this observation, you may be able to increase both your understanding of and comfort with conflict.

The next time you're watching television, or are around at least two other people, pay close attention if you notice a conflict starting. Practice your listening and observation skills. Ask yourself these questions:

- Is one of the people trying to avoid the conflict?
- Are they both expressing themselves directly and honestly?
- Do they both express a strong desire to be right?
- What kind of communication skills are they using ("I" statements or "You" statements)?
- Is either of them exhibiting active listening skills?
- Is the conflict escalating? If not, and they seem to be coming to a resolution, why?

Facts, myths, values, and unknowns

Do this exercise with at least one other person.

Although facts, myths, values, and unknowns should be clearly distinguishable, it's remarkable how two (or more) people don't necessarily identify them the same way. By doing this exercise, you'll probably learn that distinguishing between them is not always as easy as it seems. Inevitably, different people identify them differently. In a sense, it's more important to think about and recognize the differences between perspectives than it is to be right or wrong.

1. Choose a newspaper article. Use four different colors of highlighters–one each for facts, myths, values, and unknowns. Highlight the fact, myth, value, or unknown in each sentence or paragraph.

2. Have someone else do the same.

3. Discuss what each of you came up with. Use the section of this publication on facts, myths, values, and unknowns to guide your discussion.

Resources

Training

The Family Community Leadership program at Oregon State University has excellent publications and training opportunities–free or for a nominal charge–in many Oregon counties. Contact your county OSU Extension Service office for details.

The Program for Community Problem Solving offers training and presentations in negotiation, collaboration, facilitation, and mediation, and maintains a network of professionals working in the field of community collaboration. For more information, contact PCPS, 1319 F St. NW, Suite Suite 204, Washington, DC 20004; phone: 202-783-2961.

The Center for Conflict Studies, Portland, OR, offers workshops on conflict, negotiation, and mediation; phone: 503-236-3149.

The Oregon Mediation Association, Portland, OR, offers a directory of professional mediators; address: P.O. Box 2952, Portland, OR 97208; phone: 503-872-9775.

Information

Getting Past No, by W. Ury (Penguin, New York).

Getting To Yes, 2nd edition, by R. Fisher, W. Ury, and Patton (Penguin, New York, 1991).

Getting Together, by R. Fisher and S. Brown (Penguin, New York, 1988).

Partnership Handbook: A Resource and Guidebook for Local Groups Addressing Natural Resource, Land Use, or Environmental Issues, by A. Moote (Water Resources Research Center, College of Agriculture, University of Arizona, Tucson). Web: http://ag.arizona.edu/partners/

MOVING FORWARD–THE NEXT STEPS

On your own, use the lines below to fill in steps, actions, thoughts, contacts, etc. you'll take to move yourself and your group ahead in avoiding and dealing with stumbling blocks.

1._____

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2._____

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3._____

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OTHER PUBLICATIONS IN THIS SERIES

Choosing an Organizational Structure, Mission, and Goals, EC 1507, by Viviane Simon-Brown (April 1999). $2.00

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Decision Making, EC 1509, by Pat Corcoran (April 1999). $2.00

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