

Name of Exercise: Surrey Consensus Building Network

Location: Surrey, UK

Participation Exercise under which Article? Capacity Building

Purpose of Participation Exercise:

To train a group of local facilitators to create a network of trained people and encourage the wider use of consensus-building techniques. These people provide high quality facilitation skills to each other and to participating organisations at low cost. The training and practical experience develops the personal and professional skills of individuals within the Network.

Participation Techniques Used:

A total of 19 people undertook 4 days of consensus building training spread over 8 months (August 1998 to May 1999). The training was integrated with opportunities to work on Local Environment Agency Plan (LEAP) events and LA21 events in the area. This gave Network members the opportunity to put their training into practice and gain vital experience in designing and facilitating events on their own.

The cost of the training was covered by the trainees' employers at a cost of £260 per person. The organisations paid this since they benefit because their staff become better trained and they have access to local trained facilitators.

The training was delivered as part of an initiative by The Environment Council, an independent charity and leading organisation in the use of managed "Stakeholder Dialogue" to find solutions to complex environmental and sustainability issues.

The group learned many skills including:

- analysis of stakeholder's different views;
- recording and reporting key points and agreements on paper flip-charts;
- effective questioning techniques;
- planning an effective participation process;
- planning an effective workshop;
- finding areas of agreement between opposing groups;
- methods for resolving conflicts; and
- methods for dealing with difficult behaviour by participants.

The training involves presentation, discussion, role play and group exercises and a large amount of practice at the various skills of facilitation.

Who participated?

The original 19 Network members were made up of staff from local authorities, the Environment Agency and LA21 volunteers. The need for a Network was identified as a result of increasing recognition of the value of consensus building in many areas of new and developing activity. Local members of the public in the Surrey area participated in events during and after the training (including the LEAP process), and continue to do so, but they are not the focus of this exercise. It is envisaged that in the long term it could be possible to establish a countrywide Network to include Local Government, agencies and NGOs which would enhance relationships between these groups.

Stage(s) at which public participated in the process:

The public are not the focus of this particular exercise, although the effective involvement of the interested members of the public in complex local decisions is the ultimate aim of the initiative. Members of the public were therefore involved in the workshops facilitated by Network members (e.g. LA21 and LEAP events).

What information was made available?

The original 19 trainees found out about the training through the Professional Environmental Coordinators' Network in Surrey which has links with the LA21 process. As the purpose of the Network is to encourage the use of consensus building within Surrey by trained facilitators, the facilitated consensus building events are themselves the media by which stakeholders come into contact with each other on issues of common concern. The result is improved communication between all stakeholders.

The Environment Council also published a case study on the Surrey Local Network training – one in a series demonstrating the different uses of managed stakeholder dialogue in a wide variety of situations – both public and private sector, from early planning and strategy to high conflict situations.

What was the outcome of the exercise?

Rather than paying for professional facilitators, organisations in the Network are able to access local trained facilitators and use them on an exchange basis. All of the initial intake of trainees completed the course and have taken part as facilitators in consensus building events in the Surrey area. In the first 10 months of the Network over 40 facilitated consensus-building events took place. These ranged from 1-2 hour events with one facilitator and 6 or 7 participants to large whole day events involving up to 8 facilitators and 90 participants. The events benefit from the use of trained facilitators who already know, and have worked with, each other.

Through building capacity at the local level, valuable skills were learnt by all involved and are constantly being used and improved. This is a benefit both for the individuals involved and the organisations they work for.

Participants in the capacity building events obviously appreciate the opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process: " I was greatly impressed by the enthusiasm with which the groups tackled the questions posed, and everyone seemed to leave in good spirits."

Facilitators are trained to adapt the event if the planned process is for some reason unsuitable. "It reflected great credit on the facilitators who were able – at short notice – to rearrange the agenda to suit the wishes of the people attending", said one participant. It is important that both the sponsors and the stakeholders get what they want from the event, and the ability to alter the process at short notice ensures that this occurs.

Comments of participants in the process:

"The Network training provided a safe environment to practice facilitation techniques and learn from others' experiences. When LEAPs workshops required facilitators, I was confident in enlisting Network members as I was assured by their training and working methods – one less thing to worry about."

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