Facilitating Community-Based Solutions

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Abstract

Today, many fire agencies acknowledge that they cannot protect all citizens from all wildland fires. Our limitations become most apparent during major fires at the wildland-urban interface. Citizens too, are beginning to understand that neither land management agencies nor local fire authorities can maintain fire suppression capabilities sufficient to conserve private property under extreme fire conditions. Meanwhile, governments constantly reevaluate both the missions and the capabilities of public fire management agencies. With these evaluations, come a growing understanding that the private property owner bears a margin of responsibility for protecting his or her own safety and property.

Progressive public fire agencies will adapt to this changing operational environment by recognizing the importance of empowering people to take responsibility for their own safety and developing their own fire mitigation strategies. In fact, experience suggests that people will rigorously implement only those fire prevention and mitigation strategies that they help develop themselves. Therefore, today, many of our best solutions are "community-based solutions."

Community-based solutions allow groups of people to rally around a commonly perceived problem that threatens their community; agree on the nature of the problem; and tackle it. Highly successful community efforts produce durable results, and derive from processes that are participatory, inclusive and highly collaborative.

Successful community-based solutions also require "community capacity," or an ability to act. A combination of commitment, resources and skills that a community can deploy represents that community's capacity to address a problem. This paper explores ways in which public agencies can initiate and facilitate community efforts, build community capacity, develop commitment and produce lasting results.

Introduction

Increasingly, fire agencies recognize that they cannot protect all citizens from all wildland fires. The limitations of both wildland and municipal fire agencies become most evident during major fires at the wildland-urban interface. (Boura, 1999; Cohen, 1999; Rohrmann, 1999; Tasmania Fire Service, 1994; Smith et al, 1991)

Citizens too, are beginning to recognize that neither land management agencies nor local fire authorities can maintain fire suppression capabilities sufficient to conserve private property under extreme fire conditions. With this recognition, comes a growing understanding that the private property owner bears a margin of responsibility for protecting his or her own safety and property. (Boura, 1999; Cohen, 1999; Ingalsbee, 2003, Waldron, 2001)

Progressive fire authorities are adapting to this changing operational environment by empowering people to take responsibility for their own safety and developing their own fire mitigation strategies. In fact, experience suggests that people will rigorously implement fire prevention and mitigation strategies only if they have helped develop them. (Beckingsale, 1994; Boura, 1999; Jurie, 2000)

Community-Based Solutions

Increasingly, "community-based solutions" provide effective, and perhaps the best, solutions to public policy issues. Successful community-based solutions typically share three essential characteristics. First, they are collaborative. Second, they are inclusive. Finally, they get people involved, resulting in commitment that allows durable, or lasting results.

Collaboration

To collaborate means to work jointly with others. In regard to community initiatives, collaboration occurs when people with different viewpoints work together to foster mutual understanding, build agreement and resolve disputes regarding community issues. (Helling, 1998; Margerum, 2002; McKinney, 1998)

According to Helling (1998) "Collaboration creates a temporary forum within which consensus about the problem can be sought, mutually agreeable solutions can be invented, and collective actions to implement the solutions can be taken."

Collaboration and Results

The value of collaborative process lies in the ability to produce inclusive, sustainable results that people implement with commitment. However, community organizers may also encounter members of community groups and task forces who view the act of collaborating as a sufficient accomplishment in itself. (Helling, 1998) Some stakeholders, provided a collaborative effort, will exit the community initiative with a sense of accomplishment regardless of the significance of the effort's results.

For example, Helling (1998) evaluated a community visioning process undertaken by the regional planning agency for ten counties making up the core of the Atlanta, Georgia (USA) metropolitan region. At the time, planners described this collaborative project as "the largest community-based long-range planning effort ever conducted" in the United States.

According to Helling's evaluation, the Atlanta effort engaged over 1000 people and expended nearly $4.4 million over four years, but yielded few immediate results and produced no plan capable of achieving the vision. However, Helling also found that most participants responding to her research survey felt that the collaborative effort had accomplished something significant for the community. Over 50% of respondents felt that the collaborative process itself, and the networking, connections and participation that flowed from the process represented the accomplishment. (Helling, 1999)

In this way, the findings of Helling's study illustrate the power of collaborative processes and a potential weakness. While the very act of collaborating may represent a breakthrough for a given community, collaboration without tangible results can also represent a significant

source of tension among collaborating parties, as result-oriented and process-oriented stakeholders grow frustrated with each other.

In addition, community initiatives come under increasing scrutiny as citizens, politicians and researchers show less tolerance for the conventional wisdom that collaborative efforts are inherently good. More and more, people look for the quality and endurance of the results produced by collaborative efforts. (Helling, 1998; Margerum, 2002; Rohrmann, 1999)

Given the growing desire for processes that produce results, public fire authorities hoping to foster community-based solutions to fire problems, and to achieve lasting commitment to those community-based initiatives would be wise to measure their success by the results produced, rather than simply by the tools they use.

Helling (1999) supports this view when she hypothesizes that one reason that the Atlanta's collaborative visioning effort achieved few tangible results was that the organizers established objectives for the process, but not for the outcome of the process. Other researchers have found that simply providing a collaborative forum does not assure acceptable decisions or the resolution of conflict and that failure to articulate criteria for evaluating results represents a common process weakness. (Margerum, 2002)

Inclusion

Successful community initiatives involve those people affected by the issue, those needed to implement any agreement, and anyone who may undermine the process if not included. (McKinney, 1998) This description provides an effective definition of a class of people commonly known as "stakeholders." Helling (1998) provides an alternative definition, characterizing stakeholders as "all individuals, groups or organizations that are directly influenced by actions others take to solve the problem." In practical terms stakeholders are parties with an interest in an issue and may include individuals, groups of people, organizations or institutions.

Successful community-based solutions typically evolve from efforts that include all relevant stakeholders, regardless of perspective. Efforts primarily driven by agencies, without sufficient involvement by stakeholders, run the risk of rejection by the community as "just another government program."

The success of community initiatives facilitated by government agencies (whether the local volunteer fire department or the Federal government) largely depends on conscious decisions that the facilitators make about inclusion and cooperation. No formula exists for determining the appropriate degree of inclusiveness and collaboration for a given project or circumstance. However, most often, as involvement and participation go up, commitment and potential for success follow.

There exists a tension and a system of competing forces. Collaborative approaches nearly never accomplish work expediently. The value of collaboration lies in the potential for higher quality and more lasting outcomes that a group effort brings. While public agencies naturally, and rightly, seek a compact and efficient public process, with each decision the organizers make to exclude people or groups, they lessen the likelihood that those people or groups will feel like they are an adequate part of the plan or decision. Stakeholders, unsatisfied with their role or influence in a process, rarely support the resulting decision or

plan. Similarly, with each decision that the organizers make to reduce collaboration, in other words to reduce the influence the group has over the process, the problem definition, the solutions and implementation, the greater the possibility that people will grow ambivalent, apathetic, resistant or hostile to the decision, plan or solution.

Involvement, Participation and Commitment

To succeed, community-based initiatives require commitment both by the involved communities and by the involved public agencies. A community achieves commitment when it obtains sustained support throughout implementation of the solution, agreement or decision. This sustained effort occurs, in part, because people know what needs doing. Further, people sustain their involvement because they want to be involved, not because they are being forced, coerced or otherwise compelled to comply. Finally, people continue in community efforts because they remain interested and engaged in implementation.

This kind of commitment requires involvement. In his influential book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* Stephen R. Covey forcefully illustrates the relationship between involvement and commitment. Covey observes that "people are not committed to the determinations of other people for their lives" and goes on to say, "Without involvement, there is no commitment. Mark it down, asterisk it, circle it, underline it. No involvement, no commitment." (Covey, 1989) The literature strongly supports this same point in regard to community initiatives. Commitment to community-based solutions requires the active participation of community members.

Michael Doyle, in his foreword to *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, asserts that "if people don't participate in and own" the solution to problems they face, or if they do not agree with a decision, we should not expect success. In fact, Doyle asserts that without participation, "implementation will be half-hearted at best, probably misunderstood, and more likely than not, fail." (Kaner et al, 1996) Public fire agencies wanting people to commit to a fire safe community, to a hazard reduction program, or the idea of sheltering in-place rather than evacuating must involve the community's citizens in the development, implementation and ongoing evaluation of those initiatives.

With perspectives on the responsibility of the private property owner shifting, public fire authorities have shown increasing interest in empowering people to take responsibility for their own safety and developing their own fire mitigation strategies. Consequently, fire agencies increasingly rely on "public involvement" measures to inform and educate citizens or to seek their input and advice.

With experience, many public agencies have become adept at public involvement, and continue to improve at making efforts inclusive. However, truly collaborative efforts can prove problematic for government agencies, and, relatively few are very skilled at fostering active, involved participation by stakeholders. (Margerum, 2002; Helling, 1996)

Collaborative participation may require fire authorities to modify and expand their relationships with the communities they protect. (Boura, 1999; Cohen, 1999; Lipnack & Stamps, 2000) Successful collaborative processes enable the stakeholder group with a great deal of responsibility for identifying and defining the problem and crafting and implementing solutions. Ideally, a group of people rallies around a commonly perceived problem, agrees

on its nature, and finds and implements the solutions to the problem with a high degree of commitment.

Unfortunately, this kind of effort remains relatively uncommon, particularly because they require public agencies and their staffs to relinquish a degree of control that they have traditionally maintained, and often require agencies and their personnel to significantly alter their relationship and approach to the community. Typical efforts organized by public agencies allow for public involvement, and they increasingly include most, if not all, stakeholders. However, too often, agency led efforts fail to meet the expectations of either the agency or the community.

One reason is that, even when inclusive, communities perceive agency-based efforts as token, insincere or somewhat coercive. Too often, public agencies simply go through the motions of involving the public, bringing groups of people together merely for the purpose of fulfilling legal requirements or to create the impression of "public involvement." In today's operational environment, they do so at their peril; as half-hearted or less-than-sincere efforts tend to breed distrust and can produce the unintended consequence of inspiring the active resistance of citizens.

In his evaluation of the Southeast Queensland 2001 (SEQ 2001) regional planning process, Margerum (2002) cites, as a weakness in the process, opportunities for stakeholder and public input limited to public comments, public meetings and responses to a published document. Unfortunately, Margerum describes a weakness shared by very many public involvement efforts organized by public agencies. Unfortunately, these efforts tend to suffer from inherent distrust and, more often than not, gain little more than the community's ambivalent or apathetic acceptance without widespread support. At worst, well-meaning, but agency dominated attempts at public involvement result in the same unintended consequence as insincere efforts, the inspiration of active resistance by citizens. (Margerum, 2002)

Collaboration is more than allowing public involvement and inviting everybody to a public hearing. Successful community initiatives require commitment, and the highest levels of commitment result from involvement that is truly collaborative and participatory. A quality collaborative effort provides a temporary forum within which people can seek consensus and mutually agreeable solutions and plan collective actions. In this way, the successful initiative will allow people to work jointly with others, constructively explore their differences, and search for solutions.

Collaborative Processes and Consensus

Many collaborative processes employ the consensus organizing technique and/or the consensus decision-making method. Numerous definitions of consensus exist. However, for the purposes of this paper, building consensus means that affected parties jointly decide how to resolve a dispute or improve a situation. (Doyle & Straus, 1976; Gittell & Vidal, 1998; McKinney, 1998) Consensus building processes provide community initiatives with an incredibly powerful tool. Processes that follow good models of consensus building are likely to achieve high-quality outcomes. Furthermore, highly collaborative efforts resulting in consensus decisions can produce the very highest level of ownership, thereby producing "durable" or lasting results. (Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Margerum, 2002; McKinney, 1998; Straus & Harris, 2002)

However, not all collaborative processes require consensus or employ that particular decision-making method. Indeed, depending on circumstances, consensus may not always prove appropriate or desirable. Generally speaking, effective process facilitators reserve consensus building for situations where the group must, or hopes to, achieve agreement. Other efforts may spring from other motivations, including providing information and education or seeking input or advice. In these circumstances, the process may not seek consensus from the group. (McKinney, 1998)

Some confusion in this area remains responsible for negative attitudes and resistance toward collaborative efforts and consensus-building processes. In some cases, public agencies have adopted a mind-set that their decisions always require consensus, that consensus decisions always represent good decisions and, therefore, seeking consensus represents the sole or dominant decision-making method. Consequently, experienced facilitators encounter resistance to collaborative approaches from stakeholders who have experienced the inappropriate or clumsy use of consensus building. Helling (1999) hypothesizes that Atlanta's collaborative visioning effort achieved few tangible results, in part, because the process "required consensus without having established a clear mandate, incentive or pressing problem to foster participation and spur compromise and change."

Margerum (2002) cites a consensus related weakness in the SEQ 2001 effort, that being goals, arrived at by consensus, that failed to provide clear direction. According to Margerum, "While the creative and dynamic potential of collaboration can offer inventive new options, it could also offer flawed policies and approaches. In particular, there may be greater potential for participants to latch on to poorly conceived approaches in the effort to reach consensus."

A poor decision, arrived at by consensus is still a poor decision. In other cases, consensus may not represent a real possibility, or may not represent an appropriate goal. Effective community facilitators understand that it is not so important that the group employs one, particular decision-making method. What remains very important is that, right from the start, participants understand their role, what decision–making method will be used, and how much influence they have on the ultimate decision.

The Role of the Public Fire Agency

A group or meeting facilitator manages a process. By supervising the mechanics of the process, a facilitator can help make a group work together more easily than they might on their own. By using a facilitator, the collaborating group separates the process role from the decision-making, planning or problem-solving role; delegates procedural functions to the facilitator, and enables stakeholders to remain engaged in the issues and the responsibility for planning, problem-solving or decision-making. (Doyle & Straus, 1976; Kaner et al., 1999)

Public fire agency personnel may struggle with knowing whether they may appropriately perform in the facilitative role. The appropriate role for the public fire agency depends on the circumstances of the situation and on the agency's needs and motivations. To effectively influence community-based initiatives, public fire agencies must consciously decide, and make clear, the agency's role and its motivations for participating. Consequently, involved agency personnel must understand what role their agency has chosen and what part they play.

Think in terms of three possible roles. First, the agency and its personnel may choose to remain in the traditional role of community educator, stakeholder or other vested participant.

Second, the agency and its personnel may convene the collaborative process, taking the initiative to call together the stakeholders. Finally, whether acting as convener or not, agency officials might fill the role of facilitator. Depending on the circumstances, all the roles described here may prove appropriate for public fire agencies, and all can fit into a community-based, collaborative process. Representatives of public fire agencies participating in collaborative processes must clearly understand their agency's role, what the agency hopes to accomplish and what personal role and motivation remains appropriate for them. Most importantly, the fire official must know whether they are convening the process, facilitating the process, serving as a resource, advocating a position or participating as a member of a problem-solving or decision-making group.

Often the public fire agency convenes a group of people to identify or clarify a problem and asks the group to help the agency determine how to solve that problem. Other times the agency might convene a group, describe a proposed course of action, and ask the group for their input while remaining as the ultimate decision-maker.

With increasing frequency, agencies view themselves in a facilitative role, and many agency fire managers will, at some time, view themselves as the facilitator. Furthermore, citizens increasingly expect that public agencies will function in this way. If a representative of a public fire agency envisions their role as that of process facilitator, they must remain completely clear on the responsibilities of that role and remain faithful to their duty as facilitator, to perform as a neutral servant of the group and ensure that the group employs the most effective methods to efficiently complete their task. (Doyle & Straus, 1976) In this role, facilitation skills prove very important, because the agency official will depend on the power of consensus rather than the power of their authority as a public official.

For example, a community might come to a fire agency saying, "we think we have a fire problem and we would like you to help us solve that problem. What we want you to do is facilitate our process." In this circumstance, fire officials might provide that group with a process that allows the group to identify and define its problem, develop solutions to the problem and implement an action plan, without the fire official participating in the content of the discussion, even to provide expert advice. This represents truly "content neutral" facilitation.

While theoretically appropriate, the community and the facilitating agency may find such a stark separation of duties unnecessary. However, both the problem-solving or decision-making group and their facilitator must always remember that the more involved the facilitator becomes in the content, the more difficult it becomes for that person to fairly and objectively manage the process. At some point, the wise agency would assess whether they can remain truly objective in the facilitative role, and if not, consider engaging a third-party, neutral facilitator.

Under differing circumstances, the agency may have decided the nature of the problem and the agency's planned solution. Under these circumstances, the agency might intend to convene a group of people to gain support, cooperation or acceptance for the agency's decision. While common, sometimes unavoidable and at times completely appropriate, public fire agencies should not confuse these efforts with facilitating a "community-based solution." In these circumstances, the agency is proposing an agency-based solution and positioning itself beyond the facilitative role, choosing instead the role of advocacy. That advocacy role may often represent an appropriate stance under the circumstances. As with

any role in community-based initiatives, public agencies must consciously choose, and then remain clear on, the agency's role and their representative's part in it.

Capacity building

Community capacity refers to the capabilities that exist within communities that enable that community to act on collective problems or to maintain the well being of the community. Community capacity may include financial capacity, physical resources, human resources, leadership and social networks. (Chaskin, 2001; Frank & Smith, 1999; Jurie, 2000) Communities most often develop effective capacity to act when a challenge or opportunity presents itself, the community responds, people find common ground, collective decisions get made, positive change takes place and community members become aware of their power to act to benefit their community. (Frank & Smith, 1999)

People need to be convinced that they have the ability to act and that their actions can make a difference to their community. Today, people are very inclined to defer to outside experts, such as public fire agencies, who they see as having the answers. Fire officials have become quite accustomed to fulfilling those expectations. However, fire authorities and the fire-prone communities they protect fail to develop a community capacity to act on common problems when their reliance on fire authorities is too complete. Around the world, we have witnessed growing dependence on, and expectations of, fire agencies that are unlikely to meet the community's high expectations when fire strikes at the urban-wildland interface during extreme conditions.

Herein lies a relatively new and evolving role for the public fire agency. This new role builds upon and enhances, rather than diminishing or replacing, the traditional function of the fire service. Progressive fire authorities increasingly recognize their role as community capacity builders and their responsibility to create awareness, motivate community members to take responsibility, and to facilitate community-based solutions. (Frank & Smith, 2000, Lipnack & Stamps, 2000) Most communities will need the assistance of the fire agency as they develop their community-driven fire mitigation responses. For example, in his evaluation of Community Fireguard programs in Victoria, Australia, Rohrmann (1999) found that a considerable degree of guidance and direction is necessary in order to get resident groups activated and eventually taking responsibility for improving fire preparedness.

A Successful Community-Based Solution

The Australian Community Fireguard programs provide an effective example of a collaborative approach through which public fire authorities enable community-based solutions and help communities to build capacity.

Community Fireguard initiatives provide a unique case study, first because Community Fireguard programs have existed for ten years. Furthermore, the Department of Psychology at Melbourne University has commenced a longitudinal study of the effectiveness of Community Fireguard programs in the State of Victoria.

Consequently, both anecdotal evidence and scholarly research offer evidence that this community-based approach benefits residents in fire-prone areas and improves fire risk mitigation by both individuals and the community. Preliminary findings of the Melbourne University research suggest considerable potential for the Community Fireguard concept, and

offer encouragement that inclusive, participatory and highly collaborative fire mitigation efforts can achieve durable results that originate from the community. (Beckingsale, 1994; Boura, 1999; Rohrmann, 1999; Tasmania Fire Service 1994)

Originally conceived by the Country Fire Authority (CFA) in Victoria, Community Fireguard programs have spread to other Australian states including New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania. This community-based initiative allows groups of people to come together, agree on the nature of a fire problem threatening their community, craft solutions that make sense for the community, and develop "community capacity," or an ability to act. According to Boura (1999) Community Fireguard programs "involve small groups of people living in high fire risk areas, taking responsibility for their own fire safety and working together to devise survival strategies which suit their own situation." Most Community Fireguard groups are self-initiated.

Conclusion

Recognition is growing that land management agencies and local fire authorities cannot protect all citizens from all wildfires. Further, with perspectives on the responsibility of the private property owner shifting, public fire authorities have shown increasing interest in empowering people, through community-based solutions. Community-based solutions allow groups of people to rally around a commonly perceived problem threatening their community; agree on the nature of the problem; and deal with it. Highly successful community efforts produce durable results; derive from processes that are participatory, inclusive and highly collaborative; and employ existing "community capacity," or build that capacity when it does not exist.

When it comes to fostering community-based solutions, the appropriate role for public fire agencies depends on the circumstances and on the agency's needs and motivations. The agency may choose to remain in the traditional role of community educator, stakeholder or other vested participant; convene the collaborative process; or facilitate the group effort. Depending on the circumstances, all the roles described here may prove appropriate for public fire agencies, and all can fit into a community-based, collaborative process. To effectively influence community-based initiatives, public fire agencies must consciously decide, and make clear, the agency's role and its motivations for participating. Given the growing desire for processes that produce results, public fire authorities hoping to foster community-based solutions producing lasting results would be wise to assure that the collaborating parties establish objectives for the outcome of the process and articulate criteria for evaluating results.

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