THE DCNR "COLLABORATIVE" PLANNING PROCESS

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(The Sanaghan Group acted as the lead designer and facilitator for this large scale, collaborative planning process. We worked closely with DCNR employees to train people on meeting facilitation, planning processes and communication protocols.)

Background

The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation & Natural Resources (DCNR) is a complex, mid-size state agency with a budget of approximately $325 million. It has 1395 salaried and 1900 wage employees, most of whom work in state park and forest field offices throughout the state. (An organization chart of DCNR's Deputates, Bureaus and Offices is provided in the appendix)

DCNR manages 117 state parks and 2.1 million acres of state forest land. It provides information on the state's ecological and geological resources. It also manages a variety of grant and technical assistance programs addressing community recreation, heritage regions, rivers conservation, greenways and trails and natural areas and open space.

In 2003, Michael DiBerardinis became the Secretary for DCNR. He had extensive experience with large, urban city government and the foundation world before he came to DCNR. He was also well-versed in collaborative leadership and management practices.

With the help of an outside consultant he had worked with previously and his Executive Team, he created an extensive, collaborative statewide planning process that meaningfully involved more than 1800 people throughout the state. His goal was to build a powerful future for DCNR through engagement, listening, reflection and leadership. Through a year long planning process, he developed the agency's Action Plan that would guide the agency's direction and resources over the next five years.

"I knew from the very beginning that I had to engage staff and stakeholders as I came on board. There was so much to learn about the complexity of a state agency. I hit the road running. I went out and talked with people, listened, and reflected on what I was learning. I've found that by doing this, everybody's thinking is changed and advanced as a result, and that real relationships are built by the transparent process. In my first six months I met with hundreds of people in what felt like hundreds of meetings. It was the best way for me to make sense of the issues I was going to inherit and the complexities I was going to face." Secretary DiBerardinis

Creating the Action Plan

At the beginning of the year-long process, the Secretary identified several important "guiding principles" that would help govern the planning process and hold the department accountable to internal and external stakeholders.

Guiding Principles

1. Transparent Communication

Through the many months of the planning process, the Department had to be committed to communicating effectively with internal and external stakeholders. This was not meant to be a secretive process where a few people know what's going on. We wanted everyone to feel well informed throughout the process. This was done in several ways:

- Planning process updates were shared at weekly Executive Team meetings; monthly external advisory council meetings; and specific meetings with external stakeholders.

- An internal travel "blog" detailed the Secretary's travels throughout the state and what he was learning from his interaction with employees.

- A web page that was easily accessible by both internal and external stakeholders was maintained to keep people informed about the overall planning process.

- After every interactive planning meeting, an informal report of the results was either sent to participants directly or posted on the web page for review.

2. Meaningful Engagement of Stakeholders

- All of the internal and external stakeholder meetings were "designed" for maximum participation and interaction. Trained internal facilitators were used to manage the meetings so that they produced real outcomes and allowed for maximum conversation and interaction. Small groups were utilized to share ideas, think together and produce work.

•Stakeholders were listened to carefully and their contributions influenced   the planning process (e.g. concept papers). DCNR created the opportunity for diverse groups (both internal and external stakeholders) to talk with each other about the issues and share their different ideas and perspectives.

Respectful discussion and dialogue was adhered to.

"True collaboration has to be organized and disciplined. It just doesn't happen by itself. When you work with large groups, you have to intentionally design the interaction to ensure all the voices are heard. It's a very thoughtful process."

Secretary DiBerardinis

3. DCNR had to "own" the process

Although the Secretary used the services of a trusted and experienced external consultant, he did not want an "expert" telling him what the Department should do. The consultant was charged with designing the collaborative planning process with him but DCNR employees would do most of the thinking and working. The Secretary wanted DCNR employees to be both authors and owners of the planning process. He wanted internal and external stakeholders to witness the ownership of the process and

DCNR's commitment to its integrity and implementation.

- Well-trained, internal staff facilitated dozens of meetings across the state

- Our internal staff wrote, edited and revised the "concept papers," and synthesized them into the final Action Plan

- The Secretary or members of his Executive team presided at every meeting to show the importance the senior leadership team placed in the process

- A "core planning" team, along with the Secretary's Executive team, established the guiding principles for the planning process and held everyone accountable for adherence to them

- The role of the planning consultant was to facilitate meetings, not deliver key messages or summarize information. This was done by senior DCNR leaders

The Collaborative Journey

The year-long planning process had five distinct phases:

- I.   Data gathering and engagement
- II.   Getting organized operationally
- III. Sense making and feedback
- IV.   Vision conferences
- V.   Action Plan to Implementation

I.   The "Road" Show - Data Gathering and Engagement

The Secretary began his tenure with an extended series of interactive meetings with both internal and external stakeholders throughout the state. The purpose of these meetings was

- to greet and meet people throughout the state and begin to build a relationship

- to engage their thinking about the future hopes and challenges of DCNR

- to listen to and learn from the interaction and discussions

These early meetings were used to gather strategic information, asking each group of external stakeholders or employees to answer some directed focus questions that provided us with quality information. For example:

- What does DCNR do well?

- How can we improve our services to you?

- What challenges and opportunities do you see DCNR facing in the next few years? (What are the opportunities for growth and advancement?)

- What advice do you have for the Secretary?

Early messages that were heard were that the agency had established a strong foundation since its creation in 1995; and, the opportunity now existed for the agency to extend its mission to be a leading advocate and steward for the natural resources of the state.

"As my touring continued throughout the state, a message that was communicated over and over again by external stakeholders was: think regionally. People were telling us that we were doing a good job with our individual programs but that we needed to look at what we did in a broader and larger context.

This meant that as a department we had to apply our resources, investments and thinking in a coherent and strategic way within a specific regional context. It has greatly influenced our practice on the ground." Secretary DiBerardinis

More than 800 surveys were collected during this phase of the planning process:

- about 42% from external stakeholders, 58% from internal staff

- the majority, 82% were paper surveys collected at meetings, with another 18% completed online

Several important themes emerged from the survey data. These themes became the "conceptual buckets" that would later form the strategic planning themes for the entire process.

The nine themes were:

- Management of DCNR lands
- Environmental Education and Stewardship
- Economic Development through Tourism and Forest Products
- Land Conservation
- Outdoor Recreation
- Counties, Cities and Towns
- Private Forestlands Stewardship
- Conservation Science and Biodiversity
- Greenways and Trails

Editor's Note: During most senior leadership transitions, the usual way a new leader "learns" about the organization is through briefing books, reports, climate surveys, targeted interviews with key individuals and possibly some small focus groups. Secretary DiBerardinis did all these traditional things but it was not enough for him. He needed to engage people face-to-face.

This kind of approach, when done well and authentically, does several important things: 1) it communicates to stakeholders that the new leader respects their opinion and is willing to listen; 2) it more fully informs the leader about the complexity, culture, strengths and challenges of the organization; things you never really learn by reading briefing books; 3) it creates a sense of energy and positive momentum because ideas are being exchanged and relationships are being built during the engagement process and; 4) it sets a leadership "tone" that communicates that we are here to engage and collaborate together; it is not a one shot deal but the way we are going to do business in the future.

II.   Getting Organized (creating the internal mechanism to support the planning process)

Concurrent with the travels, internal mechanisms were developed to guide and support the work ahead. Communicating the high priority he placed on the planning process, the Secretary appointed his Special Assistant to head the initiative, manage the process and the various leadership and work teams created to support the process. Each team had unique roles and responsibilities.

1. The Core Planning Team (CPT)

This five person team included top and mid-level policy, communication and outreach experts. Their role was to do the "big thinking" about the planning process (e.g. Who do we need to engage? What is a realistic timeline for the process? What are the key components of our internal and external communication strategy?).

This team was also responsible for reviewing and editing written products as well as integrating all the complex parts of the planning process. The Secretary met with this team on a regular basis.

2. The Resource and Implementation Team (RIT)

This twelve member team included the core team members and senior staff from all the agency's deputates and bureaus. This team was given decision making authority, and their meetings were focused and outcome driven. They acted as: a sounding board to the process; advisors and troubleshooters; recruiters of and coaches for writing team leaders; reviewers of concept papers; and, reporters keeping the Secretary informed about challenges, problems and progress.

3. The Writing Teams

The writing teams consisted of content experts in each of the "conceptual buckets" that were to help drive the thinking of the planning process. The RIT nominated co-leaders for each writing team and the Secretary confirmed these nominations. The Secretary then met with the writing team leaders to give them their charge, answer their questions, and share his thinking about the emerging themes. The co-leaders created their own teams to write their particular concept paper, and the teams were vetted, approved and occasionally edited for additional diversity by the RIT.

4. Using internal talents – other "informal" teams

DCNR is a complex, multiple office and statewide organization. They utilized their internal technology and communication expertise to ensure regular dissemination of quality information and created user-friendly mechanisms for feedback and discussion.

E-mail communication became an important component of the communication and engagement process, and e-mail distribution lists were created for all team members to keep everyone informed and connected, with interaction and cross-dialogue encouraged. Internal web designers regularly updated internal/external web content for employee and the general public to keep them apprised of the progress of the planning process. They used their internal IT experts to advise us on methods and mechanisms for analyzing the 800+ surveys, develop an interactive database and generate reports for our writing teams.

Editor's Note: "Collaborative" planning has real structure and discipline built throughout the process. It is not an informal, fly by the seat of your pants approach. It's minimal, but appropriate structure allows for engagement, dialogue, synthesis and, most importantly, learning. The different teams that were put together, the communication protocols that were established and the guiding principles that were adhered to all created the space for collaborative work to take place.

III: Sense-Making and Feedback

Discussion Briefs

After much discussion and dialogue, it was agreed that the "conceptual buckets" would be the starting point from which we organize our thinking around a particular issue area into Discussion Briefs. The planning consultant had utilized the idea of discussion briefs in many other planning efforts over the last decade, using them to create some realistic boundaries about the scope of the planning process and provide it with appropriate focus. The Secretary charged the writing teams to draft these "Discussion Briefs", which were to be "lay person friendly" and highly informative. They were not looking for an academic tome, but for something an average citizen could read and understand in about 20 - 30 minutes.

Each discussion brief was limited to about 5 pages and included: 1) a background description of the issue with historical context and pertinent background information; 2) the identification of challenges and issues regarding the specific theme, and 3) the articulation of future possibilities, alternatives, and options. We were very careful to write these papers in neutral terms and not show any internal biases.

Discussion Brief Validation

The Secretary wanted to ensure that the discussion briefs were honest, informative, and on-target. He directed internal staff to hold a series of "validation" meetings where we sought dialogue and meaningful feedback about the briefs from internal and external stakeholders. A series of facilitated meetings (one per Discussion Brief) were held where close to 200 participants in all discussed the information and integrity of the paper and provided us with feedback. About 68% of the participants were external stakeholders, representing some 97 organizations.

Writing team leaders participated in their paper's "validation" meeting to provide explanation of their paper as necessary and to hear feedback firsthand. The writing team leaders left each meeting with all the feedback data (on flipcharts) that had been produced. They used this information to work with their teams to produce a second draft or "white paper".

White Papers

The white papers were organized according to a set structure and limited in length. The white papers were then delivered back to the validation meeting attendees for final comments. The final drafts were reviewed by the Resource and Implementation Team and the Secretary, and posted on the internal and external web sites with an invitation to give feedback. (A copy of a white paper is in the Appendix.) The white papers were utilized in the Vision Conferences to inform participants and ground the discussions with accurate information.

Editor's Note: It is unusual to have this kind of double loop feedback process with discussion briefs. Most of the time these briefs are written internally to inform the vision process. The Secretary took the additional step in creating the opportunity for external feedback and validation. He wanted to ensure that the discussion briefs had integrity and that all stakeholders trusted the data.

IV: The "Vision" Conferences (creating a shared picture)

The external planning consultant worked with the Secretary and members of the Core Team to design three "vision" conferences across the state (Pittsburg, Penn State, and Allentown). Both internal and external stakeholders were invited to attend each conference. We had about 60 participants at each conference with a 60% external, 40% internal mix.

Each conference was a full day in length and was designed for maximum participation and interaction. Participants created shared pictures of the future for each of the nine strategic themes utilizing the white papers. Participants were also asked to think deeply across all nine themes and identify possible points of leverage, integration and potential partnerships. The Secretary participated in each planning conference and members of the Secretary's Executive Team and Bureau Directors attended at least one conference.

"Government can shut itself off from external ideas and practice. Opening up ourselves to the ideas, experiences and passions of others, makes us smarter as a department. The big goal is to truly democratize big government. Can citizens influence the decisions and directions of a state agency? This is the real challenge, isn't it?"

Secretary DiBerardinis

V.   Action Plan to Implementation

The products and thinking produced during the three planning conferences went to inform the leaders of the "Action Plan" writing team. The Team met and reviewed the planning conference flipcharts and identified the key messages and driving themes from the planning conferences. Members of the Core Team, Resource and Implementation Team and Writing Teams helped develop an outline for an Action Plan, and the Core Team then wrote a rough draft of the Action Plan, with the Press Secretary as lead writer.

A draft "Action Plan" was produced within two months of the Vision Conferences. The Secretary approved the draft, and it was then posted on the intranet for employees to review and offer feedback, anonymously if they chose.

Internal Validation and Ownership of the Action Plan

After the draft Action Plan was written, a series of six DCNR staff meetings were organized across the state and two central office staff meetings over a two week period. The purpose of these meetings was to engage employee thinking about the proposed plan, seek their feedback and, most importantly, discuss implications for their work. The Secretary fully realized that staff ownership was essential to the implementation of the plan. He wanted their agreement that this plan was worthy of their

commitment and effort over the next five years. Approximately 200 attended these meetings.

The Secretary opened and closed the first of these staff meetings which was facilitated by the planning consultant. Subsequent meetings were facilitated by our internal facilitators and opened/closed by senior staff.

"When collaborative practices are principled, it can elevate your chances for success. You don't collaborate to make it look like you are listening or engaging people. It must have transparency and integrity. People need to believe that their ideas and participation really matter, that they make a difference by being part of the process." Secretary DiBerardinis

External Validation

An interactive external stakeholder meeting to create the opportunity for feedback and review by outside partners was conducted.. This feedback informed the final version of the Action Plan.

OUTCOMES OF THE ACTION PLAN PROCESS

1. Our service foresters are helping urban communities to plant trees in their neighborhood. A program called TreeVitalize has been created to help plant thousands of trees in urban neighborhoods. Other partners (e.g. Eagles football organization) have contributed money and resources to help in this effort.

2. DCNR is currently involved with 13 Conservation Landscape Initiatives (CLIs) throughout the state. The purpose of these CLIs is to engage non-profits, foundations and local governments to work together to protect and preserve the unique natural resources in their geographic areas.

3. DCNR is currently leading a Land Protection Initiative that will work with the leaders of land conservancies and foundations across the state to help protect land throughout Pennsylvania. This is the first time these diverse and broad groups of influential stakeholders have worked together to think about a coherent statewide approach to land protection.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Collaboration is hard work!

To create a collaborative planning process that meaningfully engages hundreds of stakeholders isn't easy! It takes an enormous amount of time, thinking, discussion, and planning. Anyone who tells you differently simply doesn't know what they are talking about. We assigned our best people to the process and it still was a difficult journey. We felt the hard work was worth it because we experienced both our internal staff and external stakeholders' enthusiasm for the process and we are pleased and proud of the product.

2. Leadership visibility is essential

This cannot be a delegated task to some internal planning group. The Secretary owned the process by being at the planning meetings, defining his purposes and goals, and attending many of the discussion brief and white paper meetings, and attending

all of the "visioning" conferences. This clearly communicated his interest, commitment, and ownership of the entire process. His engaged presence communicated clearly that what we were doing was important.

3. Utilize and build the capacity of your employees

We would not have been able to pull off this large and complicated process without a great deal of help from our internal staff.

- We created writing teams to craft the discussion briefs and the more refined white papers.

- We utilized internal facilitators to conduct scores of meetings throughout the state.

- Members of the Core Team and staff managed the logistical challenges of scheduling meeting rooms, communicating schedules, reaching out to external stakeholders, recruiting and providing additional training to facilitators.

- Our technology people developed our database and managed the internal and external web page.

- We used the talents of our internal communications and technology staff to develop messages, do substantial writing and editing, maintain web information, manage email lists.

By utilizing our internal staff, we were able to save hundreds of thousands of dollars and, at the same time, build the strategic skill-set of our employees. We now more deeply understand how qualified and dedicated our staff really is.

4. Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

We made great effort to keep people informed throughout this process. We had scores of face-to-face meetings throughout the process because we wanted a variety of communication vehicles. Our goal was to have a combination of high tech and high touch in our communication with people.

- The Core Team and Resource and Implementation Team met constantly to review purposes and collaborate and coordinate their efforts. After many of the "road show" meetings, the Secretary sent an e-mail message to internal staff recapping who he met with and what he learned. (People liked these a lot.)

- We utilized technology to keep people informed, posted discussion papers and white papers so people could give us feedback. We used email to update our employees as we moved through the phases of the planning process. We used email to keep external participants updated as we progressed, too. These were messages from the Secretary.

- We replied to those who submitted email comments, at a minimum thanks, many times addressing specific issues with them.

5. Collaboration builds trust

When you are transparent in your process and people can see how their participation influences and guides decision making, trust emerges. With trust many things are possible. DCNR cannot achieve all it wants to accomplish in the Action Plan all by

itself. It needs the work, action and thinking of others. Partners are emerging, other organizations are beginning to take real leadership around CLI's and Land Protection and voters are supporting our efforts. For the most part, internal and external stakeholders trust our intentions, know we will keep our word and are committed to ongoing collaboration in the future.

"When you meaningfully build an authentic relationship with others, a trusting relationship, it naturally builds in accountability. You will commit to actions and keep your word. Trust creates accountability across the board."

Secretary DiBerardinis