Water for Agriculture Webinar Series

Collaborative Competencies

Michael Kern
Associate Professor, Washington State University Extension
Affiliate Associate Professor, University of Washington Evans School of Public Policy & Governance
Principal, Michael Kern Consulting, LLC

The Water for Agriculture Webinar Series welcomed Michael Kern to share his insights on the University Network for Collaborative Governance's (UNCG) *Collaborative Competencies Framework*. Michael is the Principal at Michael Kern Consulting, LLC which provides strategic advice and guidance to leaders and decision-makers who are designing, conducting, and implementing collaborative public policy processes. In his 30 years of experience, he has worked with diverse groups to reach common ground on public policy issues and to provide facilitation, mediation, conflict resolution, strategic planning, and other services. He also serves on the Water for Agriculture project's Advisory Committee.

Michael began his presentation with a discussion of the concepts, and history of collaborative governance – and its importance and relevance across a broad range of disciplines and applications. UNCG defined collaborative governance in 2018 as "Engaging participants across the public, private and civic sectors to leverage the unique attributes and resources of each encompasses any method, model, or process that is deliberative and consensual." Michael then highlighted the foundational role of alternative dispute resolution, or ADR, in collaborative governance processes. The roots of ADR grew out of the legal sector, international diplomacy, labor/management negotiations, and peace movements in the 1960s and '70s that pushed for more of a bottom-up approach to governance.

When engaging in collaborative processes, individuals will have different roles to play in that process, including leader, facilitator, and participant. Regardless of their position all individuals involved in these processes will benefit from developing their skill set – their collaborative competencies -- to make the process effective.

> *"Collaboration is not really easy or natural for many people… most people benefit from assistance to increase their capacity to initiate, participate, or lead collaborative public policy efforts."*

In framing how to create successful collaborations, he used the UNCG Guide to Collaborative Competencies (2011) co-authored by Kirk Emerson and Steve Smutko. The five collaborative competencies outlined and described were:
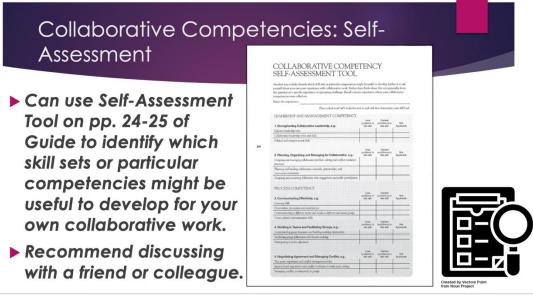
- ➤ Leadership and Management Competency,
- ➤ Process Competency,
- ➤ Analytical Competency,
- ➤ Knowledge Competency, and
- ➤ Professional Accountability Competency.

Each of these competencies are comprised of multiple skills outlined and described in detail in the guidebook. Michael presented a brief summary of each.

- **Leadership and Management Competency** include the skills of strengthening collaborative leadership and of planning, organizing, and managing collaboration. Exercising collaborative leadership requires drawing on that authority when needed and sharing it when possible. In a collaborative environment, decisions can be shared, but leaders should understand at what points they are sharing their authority and when they are responsible for decisions. Depending on an initiative's leadership this may involve a third-party mediator or external facilitator.

- **Process Competency** requires skills for communicating effectively, working in teams, facilitating groups, negotiating agreements, and managing conflict. Process Competency also means active listening, maintaining and encouraging productive dialogue, acknowledging the complexity of multi-party negotiations, expecting miscommunication to occur throughout the process, and accepting that conflict may give rise to ideas for new solutions.

- **Analytical Competency** includes evaluating and adapting processes and applying analytic skills and strategical thinking. This competency emphasizes situational assessment and recognizing that every collaborative process will be unique. This requires understanding the stakeholders, their interests, and the conditions that are most likely to create a successful collaboration.

- **Knowledge Management Competency** refers to using and integrating technology, and technical, scientific, and cultural information into the process. In collaborative processes it is important to identify information gathering methods and sources of data that all the parties can trust.

- **Professional Accountability Competency** focuses on integrity, transparency, and professionalism. In collaborative environments it is important to be transparent about purposes and objectives of the process, to be clear about the authorities, requirements, and constraints of involved parties, and to maintain professionalism and fidelity to the process and participants. Leaders need to seek candid feedback from all participants, protect confidentiality of information, and understand their own limitations, flexibilities, and adaptiveness.

Concluding his presentation, Michael encouraged participants to take the collaborative competency assessment within the guidebook, to understand their own strengths and where they can build. He advocated the wider use and understanding of the UNCG's Guide to Collaborative Competencies and discussion of the competencies with colleagues and peers.

Michael Kern

Principal, Michael Kern Consulting, LLC
michaelkernconsulting@gmail.com