

Strategies for Supporting Frontline Collaboration: Lessons from Stewardship Contracting

By Cassandra Moseley

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The Obama administration’s Open Government initiative places a strong emphasis on increasing collaboration—among agencies as well as with citizens and other stakeholders—to achieve more effective program and mission results. Agencies have developed their required Open Government Plans, but many of these plans lack details on how to successfully conduct collaborative efforts, especially on the front lines of government.

It is now useful to ask: are there examples in which collaboration is already being used as a part of how frontline workers do their jobs today? The answer: yes. Senior executives in the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) began to ask their frontline staff to collaborate locally, beginning in the early 1990s, as they saw the potential of engaging diverse groups of stakeholders to:

- Collaboratively resolve conflict
- Solve complex problems
- Bring new technical and financial resources to the problems of land management

A decade after the initial pilot projects, and more than half a decade since the passage of the 10-year authority, the use of stewardship contracting ranges widely across the national forest system and BLM districts. Some national forests and districts have made stewardship contracts and collaboration a core part of their approach to land management, for example, the BLM High Desert District in Wyoming.

There can be a lot of location-specific reasons for why collaboration is not being used. For example, when the trust in an agency is high and citizens are relatively satisfied with current levels of engagement, an agency may have a difficult time engaging collaborators. In some cases, frontline

staff sometimes may not want to collaborate and thus put no serious effort into developing it. In other instances, the local sociopolitical environment can be so toxic that efforts to collaborate quickly degenerate, as people do not act in good faith or sabotage collective action.

An agency’s culture, policies, procedures, and incentives can make it either easier or more difficult for field staff to collaborate effectively. There are strategies that agency and nongovernmental leaders can use to encourage collaboration. This report offers four strategies for collaboration based on the experiences of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Land Management. Both agencies have authorities, called “stewardship contracting,” which they used to foster collaboration at the front line in their agencies. Although stewardship contracting is a set of authorities particular to the U.S. Forest Service and BLM, much of the collaboration that these two agencies have undertaken around stewardship contracting did not require any special authority. The two agencies have used stewardship contracting as a vehicle to develop a new direction and support for collaborative approaches to federal land management.





Cassandra Moseley is the Director of the Institute for a Sustainable Environment at the University of Oregon. At the institute, she developed applied research and policy education programs, and focused on community-based forestry, federal forest management, and sustainable rural development.

Key Strategies

Building on lessons from federal forest management and the use of stewardship contracting, this report offers four key strategies for fostering frontline collaboration with citizens and other stakeholders in a community.

Strategy One: Create time and space for collaboration to develop and mature. Robust collaboration requires significant investment in time, money, and social capital. Collaboration is an evolutionary process. Initial steps may involve months or even years of talking, and only result in small concrete accomplishments at the beginning. Over time, as collaboratives build trust and facility in working together, accomplishments grow. However, efforts to rush collaboration early on can risk failure.

Strategy Two: Change the rules to encourage collaboration.

This can be done in several ways:

- **Prioritize funding for actions that have been collaboratively developed.** When field managers reach broad agreement for action with partners, agency executives should fund it, if at all possible. Building agreement only to have agency leadership unwilling to implement it demoralizes staff and partners, and lowers trust.
- **Expand local discretion so that field staff have the authority to stand by the agreements they reach.** It can be difficult for senior executives to feel comfortable devolving authorities because they may be doing so at a moment of change and uncertainty. In addition, field staff collaborating with external partners may develop solutions that are locally appropriate but different from what the senior executives might have envisioned. Nevertheless, local decision space is critical if field personnel and, especially, partners, are going to be willing to invest time and resources in collaboration.
- **Update existing procedures to support collaborative processes.** These procedures might include requiring early engagement in planning processes and revising grants, agreements systems, and paperwork to create more efficiencies in developing memoranda of understanding and obligating funds for agreements. It also may include clarifying directives about conflicts of interest. Engaging with field-level stakeholders in modifying authorities can help to ensure that procedures work for partners, not just for the agencies. Iterative learning and procedural changes can take advantage of and support innovations from the front line.

Strategy Three: Provide incentives to staff to collaborate—or consequences if they don't. This can be done in two ways:

- **Provide formal guidance that requires that the field units collaborate but which does not prescribe exactly how collaboration is to occur.** Requiring collaboration can be challenging, because one cannot define exactly what the collaboration will look like. On the other



Use of Stewardship Agreement by the BLM High Desert District, Wyoming

Time Frame: 2007 to present

Key Actors:

- Wyoming Bureau of Land Management
- Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF)
- Wyoming Department of Fish and Game
- Private landowners

Background: The RMEF, as with several other hunting and fishing nonprofit organizations, has long provided funding to federal land management agencies to manage for fish and wildlife habitat. Stewardship contracting authorities have allowed them to enter into longer term, more complex agreements to conduct restoration work on the ground. For example, the RMEF has entered into several 10-year stewardship agreements with the BLM and the U.S. Forest Service nationally. Among the earliest of these agreements was one for an 85,000-acre project on the Seeley Lake District of the Lolo National Forest in Montana to restore elk habitat along a key migration route.

Stewardship Contracts and Agreements: In 2007, the RMEF signed a stewardship agreement with the Wyoming state office of the BLM involving a project area of 174,000 acres of BLM land along with 57,300 acres of private lands and 12,000 acres of state lands. The overarching purpose of the Wyoming Front Aspen Restoration Project is to restore aspen stands across landownerships by removing conifer trees that have encroached upon the aspen due to wildfire exclusion and which are inhibiting aspen regeneration.

Lessons Learned: In some cases, such as this aspen project, stewardship contracting has served to strengthen and expand existing partnerships between the agencies and nongovernmental organizations. Here, stewardship contracting is not so much about trading goods for services or other contracting authorities, but rather about allowing the agency to use a cooperative agreement rather than a contract for land management activities, bringing nonfederal financial resources to the task of federal land restoration, allowing for a long-term arrangement, and permitting the removal and sale of material that needs to be taken from the restoration site for ecological reasons.



Aspen tree grove stands in front of pines, Bridger-Teton National Forest, Jackson Hole, Wyoming (part of the BLM High Desert District).

This stewardship agreement has been one of only two projects to use stewardship contracting authorities on BLM lands in Wyoming. Although the Wyoming state BLM office has a stewardship coordinator and some field staff interested in pursuing stewardship contrast, it lacks the procurement staff with the training to put together stewardship contracts and agreements. This means that program personnel have been reliant on other offices in other states to create their stewardship contracts and agreements. For example, the Oregon state BLM office put together the RMEF agreement. These other state offices, with their own workloads, naturally put requests from the Wyoming BLM office low on the priority list.

hand, providing no guidance creates a sense of insecurity and allows people who do not want to collaborate to avoid doing so. One approach is to provide something specific around which to collaborate—such as stewardship contracting—rather than simply telling staff to collaborate in general or prescribing exactly how to collaborate.

- **Align organizational and personal performance measures so that they support collaboration, or at least do not run counter to collaboration.** Performance measures that emphasize high production but neglect quality will likely create disincentives to collaborate.

Strategy Four: Invest in building the capacity of both governmental and nongovernmental partners involved in a collaborative effort. Understand where in the organizations these investments need to be made. Such investments can take several forms:

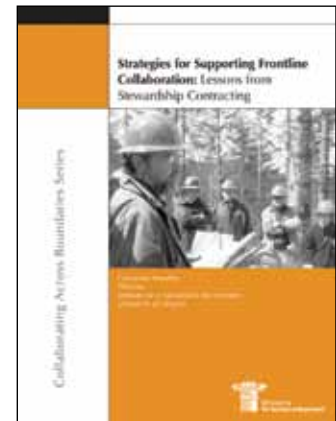
- **Create a cadre of well-trained procurement and agreements personnel who can support programmatic goals with timely, high-quality, innovative contracts and agreements.** Agencies often are called upon to engage in more complex formal arrangements—contracts and agreements—with their partners. Slow, cumbersome contracting and agreements processes can frustrate and drive away partners; poor processes cost the agency and its partners time and money.
- **Attend to the organizational and financial health of your partner organizations by providing funding for community capacity building.** This is particularly important when there is a significant interdependence between the partners and the agency and the agency is working with historically underserved or disenfranchised populations. Community organizations and collaborations may require government funding to convene and facilitate collabora-

tive groups, and to build organizational capacity to participate effectively—especially in places where there are few nonfederal resources, such as in rural, historically underserved, and impoverished communities. In addition, businesses will be unwilling to invest in new skills and innovations when they do not trust that the agency will provide a sustainable supply of opportunities.

- **Develop and conduct training that engages agency personnel and nongovernmental partners in the same training sessions.** Joint training can help create a shared understanding of the opportunities and limits of particular opportunities and authorities. Peer-to-peer learning also can help to transfer lessons from early adaptors to other agency staff. ■

TO LEARN MORE

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The report can be obtained:

- In .pdf (Acrobat) format at the Center website, www.businessofgovernment.org
- By e-mailing the Center at businessofgovernment@us.ibm.com
- By calling the Center at (202) 551-9342