

THE ROLE OF CONVENER

A convener is a person—typically a well-known public leader with credibility and stature—who brings a diverse group of people together to resolve a problem collaboratively. Experience over the past 25 years has demonstrated that conveners are often essential to achieving successful outcomes in collaborative processes, especially when the solutions reached require action by multiple sectors and levels of government.

When is a Convener Needed

During an assessment, it may become evident that a leader other than the sponsor needs to serve as convener, in order to help the participants work together to achieve the desired outcomes. This is especially likely when the sponsoring organization is perceived as an advocate for a particular outcome, when multiple agencies and levels of government need to be involved, or when past history between the sponsoring organization and other parties has been difficult.

Conveners get people involved in finding effective solutions together; they do not seek to impose their own solutions. Experience has shown that elected officials and other respected civic leaders can be very effective as conveners or co-conveners of collaborative processes, so long as they act in impartial ways. By virtue of their office, elected leaders have the power to convene people from a variety of sectors to work on public problems. Other respected leaders, by virtue of the credibility and social capital they have built in their communities, regions, or states, also have the power to convene.

When leaders serve as conveners or co-conveners of collaborative processes, the outcomes of these processes are more likely to receive support and to be formally adopted and implemented. Oregon's Senator Johnson is a good example of how an effective convener can play a powerful role in leveraging resources and gaining results. Many times when leaders have not been centrally involved as conveners, collaborative processes have not produced results. In those cases, agreements arrived at through informal collaboration were never formally implemented, either because the sponsoring organization did not follow through on its commitments, or because the process was too disconnected from traditional decision-making structures and processes.

Many examples could be cited showing how sponsors have successfully used conveners. In one case, a state transportation agency became bogged down in conflicts over proposed regulations to address a highly contentious issue. The agency consulted with the governor's office, and the governor agreed to serve as the convener of a collaborative process that brought together multiple stakeholder groups—including other state agencies, the private sector, and civic organizations—to develop the regulation. The lengthy process was managed by a facilitator. The effort was ultimately successful at overcoming the differences among agencies and other stakeholders and arriving at an implementable regulation.

When issues are place-based and involve multiple jurisdictions, elected leaders can be especially helpful as conveners. For example, an economic development agency was working in an underdeveloped region to get different school systems, community colleges, universities, and businesses working together on workforce training and opportunities for higher education. They asked the legislator from the district to convene a stakeholder group, because they knew he would have the power to bring various competing parties to the table. He was also able to use his political muscle to keep participants at the table and to help see that the outcomes they produced were implemented.

Another example was described in Chapter 3. In that case, the Arkansas Community Action Agencies Association recognized that, as an advocacy organization, they would have difficulty convening participants, so they formed a steering committee made up of utilities, social service agencies, and the Public Service Commission to serve as convener. The steering committee then convened the public forums that set the priorities for how to address the energy issue. The credibility of the broadly representative steering committee enabled them to serve effectively in the convener role.

Best Practices for Conveners

To be effective, conveners should abide by the following key guidelines.

1. Be inclusive. Conveners should be sure that a wide variety of people from different perspectives are involved. They should welcome participants from all interests—not just those with obvious interests, but also those with the economic, political, or technical resources that will help make for successful outcomes.
2. Establish a neutral meeting place. When the issue is complex and divisive, the convener must establish an impartial process and a safe space for people to open up about their beliefs and opinions. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is often helpful to get assistance from an experienced facilitator to plan and conduct the process.
3. Be impartial as to the solution. Participants must believe that the convener is not predisposed to one side or another and is trying to find a solution that all sides can embrace. The convener may need to work in a bipartisan fashion with a co-convener from the other side of the aisle, to ensure the perception of impartiality.
4. Direct, rather than dominate, the discussions. The convener must enable people to talk with each other, rather than talking only to the convener. It is often useful for someone else to facilitate the discussions so the convener can listen and ask questions. Besides, conveners will rarely have time to run all of the meetings.
5. Frame the meeting and the issue. The convener must establish a purpose for each meeting and help to ensure that the issue is framed in a way that enables all people to work together productively. Defining and naming the issue jointly can ensure that everyone is willing to contribute to the solution.
6. Keep people moving and working together. The convener should provide feedback to the group on their progress. Where institutional impediments or red tape crop up, the convener should consider using his or her own capabilities to overcome them.
7. Demonstrate ongoing visible commitment. The convener can help keep participants at the table by demonstrating that they care about the progress the group is making. Even if the convener can't be present at every meeting, he or she should send signals demonstrating on-going interest.
8. Make sure there is an outcome. The convener can help a group get to closure by establishing timetables for the process and reminding people of those timetables. The best outcomes involve written agreements that spell out an action and implementation plan, including specifying different people's responsibilities.

Questions for the Convener

- How would you like to be involved in the preparation for the process? Do you want to review plans? Do you want to meet with the sponsor or any of the participants?
- Will you chair the meetings? Do you want to facilitate the meetings, or would you prefer to make opening remarks and then have the facilitator handle the process?
- What's the best way for you and the facilitator to coordinate your respective roles and communicate during the process?
- What else can the facilitator do to support you in your role as convener?

Selecting a Convener

The process for selecting a convener needs to be transparent, so that the parties and the public understand who made the selection. During the assessment, the parties should be asked who would make a good convener. The purpose of the question is not to have the parties choose the convener, but rather to understand their perceptions about the kind of person who is needed to gain the cooperation of all interests in working toward a solution.

The most important criteria for selecting a convener is that the person be highly respected and statesmanlike—someone with a reputation for serving the public interest, with no particular axe to grind or perspective to push on the issue at hand. Sometimes people will come to the table primarily because of the convener's status—because the stature of the convener makes them feel they are doing something important and worthwhile.

A convener can be selected in a number of different ways, depending on the circumstances. If the sponsor is a state or local agency, they could ask the governor or mayor to be the convener or to name some person of stature to convene in their stead. If the sponsor is a private sector or nonprofit entity, they could work with a neutral forum and facilitator to help identify and name a convener or co-conveners as was demonstrated in the case of the Arkansas association described in Chapter 3.

Naming bipartisan co-conveners is a good way to ensure a perception of impartiality. Or, a steering committee made up of leaders from various sectors and interests could serve as convener, as in the Arkansas case.

Working with a Convener

Once a potential convener has been identified, the facilitator and/or sponsor should arrange to meet with them to discuss the results of the assessment and make plans for the proposed process. Conveners are often very busy people with severe constraints on their time. It is important to sort out what the convener is willing to do and what the facilitator's role will be.

Often conveners have had lots of experience chairing traditional meetings. They will need to understand how a collaborative process works, what consensus decision making entails, how long the process will take, how many meetings are anticipated, and what the time commitment will be. A facilitator should walk them through the stages of a collaborative process and talk about how similar processes have worked, in order to help the convener understand the process and their role in it. The facilitator might also want to provide examples of how other leaders have played the convening role. The conversation can then turn to how the convener, facilitator, and sponsor will coordinate their respective roles.

The sponsor, convener, and facilitator should meet together several times during the process to review progress and talk about what needs to happen next. The sponsor and facilitator need to ensure that the convener is kept aware every step of the way about what is happening, so there are no surprises at the end.