



Regionalism

Overcoming the Barriers to Cooperation among Localities

Workshop Report

Otis White of Civic Strategies, Inc. led a workshop for the Iowa State Association of Counties' Fall School on Nov. 29, 2006 on "Regionalism and Overcoming Barriers to Cooperation among Localities." In the two-hour session, Otis reviewed trends in regionalism and intergovernmental cooperation, and asked the more than 100 participants to work in small groups on strategies to overcome the most common obstacles to collaboration. To help, he gave participants a case study – a fictitious county in Minnesota whose county commission chair has a worthy initiative but is facing almost certain opposition. The assignment: Come up with ideas for dealing with these obstacles. At the end of the session, Otis asked participants to vote on the strategies they believed were strongest.

A common theme of the strategies suggested by participants was that leaders should prepare carefully before announcing initiatives – assembling the case for collaboration (including careful documentation of potential benefits) and thinking ahead about likely supporters and opponents. Another highly ranked strategy: Establish early on the citizens' expectations. By doing so, government leaders create legitimacy for their initiatives and show that only by working together can governments offer citizens the services they desire.

Meeting process

Otis began with a brief PowerPoint presentation about regionalism around the country. (To view the presentation, click [here](#).) In brief, Otis said, voters are creating more local



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governments, even as they demand that their governments work more closely together. At first glance this may seem contradictory, he said, but there is logic to these desires. Citizens want governments that are close to the people, but also expect them to work together on regional issues or on services that can enjoy economies of scale.

Iowa county officials recognized these sentiments two years ago in their responses to an ISAC survey asking if they would support a state law disincorporating cities of 500 or fewer people. Their answer: no, and neither would their constituents. But, they added in the same survey, they would favor greater sharing of services among governments.

Local government leaders around the country share these sentiments, Otis said. The International City/County Management Association that found in a 2003 survey that 45 percent of its member governments had considered service-sharing agreements with other entities in the previous 12 months, and half of those who considered an agreement had implemented one.

The problem, Otis went on, isn't in understanding what the citizens want – more governments but also more government cooperation. Rather, it's putting together the collaborations that make service sharing and other cooperative efforts work – in short, the practical politics of cooperation. And this is difficult because of the human instinct to oppose change – unless the case for it is compelling and convincing, and the process of implementation is logical and respectful.

To help participants think about the problems of change, Otis wrote out a simple formula for change on a flip chart page. Called the “Harvard Change Model,” it maintains there are three critical elements in successful change efforts: a convincing case that the status quo cannot continue, a compelling model or vision of the future and a logical plan or process of implementation. The more people feel each of these elements (dissatisfaction with the status quo, a compelling model for the future, and a logical process of implementation), the greater the amount of change that will result. (To read more about the Harvard Change Model, please [click here](#).)

Obstacles to Cooperation

The purpose of the workshop was for participants to come up with strategies for overcoming common obstacles to cooperation. But what are the most common obstacles? To help identify them, Otis worked with ISAC to draft a survey about the problems of cooperation, which ISAC sent to members in late October. In the survey, Otis asked members to assess possible obstacles to and assets for collaboration, and to offer ideas of their own. (To view the survey and responses, please [click here](#).)

The top factors or attitudes that hinder cooperation, ISAC members said, were:

1. Leaders fear losing control.
2. Leaders fear being taken advantage of (“we’ll pay more than we’ll get”).
3. An important community leader or leaders oppose the idea from the start.

These were the obstacles that Otis included in the workshop case study.

Case study

The case study was about fictitious White County, Minn., where County Commission Chair Bob Smith wants to combine the police department of Otisville, the main city, with the White County sheriff’s department. Smith has quietly assembled a convincing case for his idea – documenting how combining the departments would greatly improve police services while saving some money. Outside experts, including the University of Minnesota, have urged rural counties

to consider such mergers. And the time is right: The Otisville police chief has announced plans to retire next year.

Still, Smith knows he will face considerable obstacles:

- The Otisville city council's instinct will be to oppose the merger, Smith believes, because the five-officer force is a big part of the government's work force and a point of pride for the small city. For these reasons, Smith thinks the council may oppose the combination because it fears the **loss of control** over law enforcement in Otisville.
- Otisville citizens may be skeptical, too, Smith thinks, because they believe the city has lost out in previous mergers. Smith has looked at these mergers (including the 1970s merger of the city and county schools) and can find no evidence that city taxpayers were treated unfairly, but he recognizes that residents of Otisville believe they were **taken advantage of** in the past and may oppose this effort for that reason.
- Finally, the publisher of the countywide newspaper, the Otisville Gazette, has long been a critic of county government and what he calls its "power grabs." The publisher is almost certain to use the paper's editorial page to criticize this idea. Looking ahead, then, Smith anticipates the **opposition of an important person** to his initiative.

The workshop assignment: Come up with strategies for overcoming these likely obstacles. (To view the case study and the assignments, please [click here](#).)

To assist with this, participants were seated at tables of 5 to 10 people and assigned letters A, B or C. A groups worked on the first obstacle (fear of loss of control), B groups on the second (fear of being taken advantage of) and C groups on the third (the opposition of an important person). Each small group was asked to draft strategies on tabletop flip charts and be prepared to explain them.

Strategies and rankings

In reporting out their work, the groups came up with 16 unique strategies (6 for dealing with the fear of loss of control, 5 for the fear of being taken advantage of and 5 for the opposition of an important person). As a closing activity, Otis asked participants to vote using colored dots on the strongest or most workable strategy for each of these common objectives.

Interestingly, three strategies had nearly equal support for dealing with the **fear of loss of control**: "Identify potential winners and losers and use information to build alliances," "think through a shared governance structure so that government leaders have a voice, if not control, of the collaboration," and "provide up-front public information." For the **fear of being taken advantage of**, there was a clear leading strategy: "Early on, use an open-ended public process to establish what citizens desire or expect in this service area (i.e., what White County citizens want from law enforcement)." By focusing attention from the beginning on what citizens desire (the *what*) rather than the merger itself (the *how*), participants felt, Smith's proposal would have greater legitimacy and create less fear. For the **opposition of an important person**, there was also a clearly favored strategy: "Offer the publisher a place on the task force planning the collaboration." By bringing a likely opponent into the planning process, participants believed, his doubts might be assuaged. (All the suggested strategies and their rankings are below.)

Of the three assignments, the third (the opposition of an important person) was the most ambiguous because, as one participant pointed out, Commission Chair Smith should approach this obstacle with three outcomes in mind: First, that Smith might be able to persuade the publisher to support the initiative; second, that Smith might be able to convince the publisher not to actively oppose the initiative; third, failing those two, that Smith might need to find ways of countering the publisher's active opposition.

Here are the strategies and the number of votes each received:

Strategies for dealing with the fear of loss of control:

Identify potential winners and losers and use this information to build alliances	21
Think through a shared governance structure so that government leaders have a voice in, if not control of, the collaboration	21
Provide up-front public information	18
Identify how similar efforts have worked elsewhere and where they have failed: Prepare lessons and arguments accordingly	3
“Service after the sale”: Once the collaboration begins, regularly remind leaders of its benefits to maintain support	1
“Rent to own”: Take an early and easy collaborative step as preparation for the larger collaboration	1

Strategies for dealing with the fear of being taken advantage of:

Early on, use an open-ended public process to establish what citizens desire or expect in this service area (i.e., what White County citizens want from law enforcement)	27
Make the case for collaboration with facts and figures	15
Put together an inclusive task force to plan the collaboration (include trusted figures in Otisville)	14
Solicit the help of trusted figures in the community to act as advocates for the initiative (e.g., the Otisville police)	10
Establish the cost of doing nothing: Show why the status quo is not acceptable	1

Strategies for dealing with the opposition of important people:

Offer the publisher a place on the task force planning the collaboration	42
Brief the press in advance of the planned initiative	8
Ask friends of the publisher to make the case to him for this collaboration	7
If, as expected, the publisher opposes the initiative, create a “cheering squad” of leaders and citizens to write letters to the newspaper’s editorial page supporting it	6
Offer the publisher “an experience”: a hands-on opportunity to see the current situation and think about possible solutions	4

Conclusion

The greatest problem of regionalism isn’t finding opportunities for cooperation or even working out the details of collaboration. The greatest problem is managing the obstacles to change, which is what this workshop focused on. As participants indicated in their strategies, the essential skills that leaders need to manage these obstacles are planning, negotiation, communications and a practical grasp of psychology.

While the workshop was about regionalism, participants talked about skills and strategies that could be used in advancing any major government initiative. That’s because most large-scale

initiatives require collaboration of some kind, among government agencies, between public- and private-sector interests or between citizens and the government. And change almost always creates opposition.

About Civic Strategies

Otis White is president of Civic Strategies, Inc., a consulting company that helps communities make important decisions. To learn how Civic Strategies can help your community with its most difficult issues, please call us at (404) 873-5343 or e-mail us by [clicking here](#).