



Aligning Expectations for Effective Collaborative Work

In both professional and personal situations, people develop expectations about their interactions with others. Whether creating a business partnership, joining a civic organization, or getting married, people anticipate and expect certain behaviors and outcomes. Multi-party collaborative efforts involving public lands management is no different. Finding ways to develop, communicate, and maintain alignment of the participants' expectations in collaborative efforts is critical to a collaborative group's vitality and effectiveness.

When participating in collaborative efforts, people develop personal and organizational expectations including, but not limited to:

- How they will be treated.
- How disagreements will be handled.
- What they can contribute.
- How much commitment will be required.
- What challenges they face.
- What resources they need.
- How decisions will be made and implemented.
- What they hope to see accomplished.
- How their efforts will be evaluated.



James Melonas, Forest Supervisor of the Santa Fe National Forest in New Mexico, listens to Terry Connelly, Mill Manager, Walatowa Timber Industries, as he talks about the challenges of the mill. (USDA photo by Lance Cheug with permission of the Pueblo of Jemez)

[Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) defines “expectation” as the act or state of looking forward or anticipating, a prospect of future good, and the degree of probability that something will occur. An example from everyday life to illustrate these concepts would be a homeowner hiring a contractor for a kitchen remodel.

The homeowner wants:

- High-quality work with upgraded fixtures, surfaces, or appliances.
- Quick work so they are not without the use of the kitchen.
- Inexpensive work without cost overruns that would blow the budget.

The contractor can perform:

- High-quality work done inexpensively but not quickly.
- High-quality work done quickly but not inexpensively.
- Work completed quickly and inexpensively but not high quality.

The expectations of the homeowner and the expectations of the contractor are not in alignment. If they do not clearly share expectations, the potential for misunderstanding, frustration, and disappointment is high. The key to aligned expectation is constructive communication that begins early and is revisited throughout the project. Therefore, the homeowner and contractor need to openly discuss their expectations, identify what is possible and what is not, and agree on a level of quality, timeframe, and cost. Understanding and compromise are necessary by both parties to bridge the gaps caused by the misalignment of expectations and to achieve shared satisfaction with the process and outcome.

This paper is based on lessons learned and written by the USDA Forest Service National Collaboration Cadre. They worked with national forests, collaborative groups, and interested stakeholders helping them to engage in effective collaboration. For more information on collaboration processes, contact Sharon Timko, Ecosystem Management Coordination Public Engagement Specialist, Washington Office, at sharon.timko@usda.gov.



Participants in collaborative efforts should discuss what they anticipate will be the outcome of their individual and collective actions. These discussions should guide the development of the collaborative process, relationships among participants, and the range of potential outcomes generated from the group's efforts. When expectations are aligned, the collaborative group becomes cohesive and develops a shared identity.

What happens, though, when a collaborative group does not work to align expectations, or expectations become misaligned over time? According to a leader of a citizen's collaborative group working with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), misaligned, unmet, and competitive expectations have **"...the potential to turn positive relationships into adversarial relationships."**

"Nothing engenders confidence and creates a trust bond like delivering on promises made, and likewise, few things erode confidence and credibility like commitments not kept...."

The science of aligning expectations is about systematically connecting what is said with what is done. The art of aligning expectations is about closing, or better yet, eliminating the expectation gap."

—Mike Myatt, Forbes Leadership Columnist, author of Hacking Leadership, and Chairman of N2Growth

Developing, Sharing, and Meeting (or Exceeding) Expectations

How can participants in a collaborative effort align their expectations? Individuals need to identify what they expect from their involvement and communicate that to other members of the group. It takes conscious awareness of the importance of aligned expectations and diligent effort from the people participating in the collaborative effort. Participants share their expectations and negotiate through differences until their expectations converge.

Sharing expectations with people you do not know well, or may even consider "the other side," requires a reasonable degree of trust. This trust is tied to a willingness to engage in collaborative work—a commitment to collaboration. Through open and constructive communication about expectations, participants learn where their aspirations align and where convergence and consensus are not possible without flexibility. By sharing expectations throughout a collaborative process, the participants discover what they can successfully work on together. The participants also may recognize that some expectations cannot be aligned or accommodated, even as they move forward and make progress. Being honest about a willingness to compromise or not on an issue or process is essential.

Like the homeowner and contractor example (see sidebar page 1), if multi-party collaboration between the Forest Service, other agencies, communities, and stakeholders forges ahead without aligned (and periodically re-aligned) expectations, the potential for conflict is high. Participants may assume that everyone's expectations of the situation are similar, only to realize later they value different processes and outcomes leading to unmet expectations for some or all parties.



Challenges That Collaborative Partners Face in Expectation Management

As a large, multiple-use Federal agency, the Forest Service faces a number of challenges in managing the expectations of a diverse public. These can include things like:

- A Forest Service line officer makes a commitment, but someone higher in the organization overturns or modifies it.



The Weiser-Little Salmon Headwaters Project in the Payette National Forest, ID. (USDA Forest Service photo by Payette National Forest)

- Deadlines slip because critical personnel are reassigned to other tasks.
- Personnel are transferred, and their replacements do not understand or choose not to be bound by their predecessors' commitments.
- Collaborative partners expect one Forest Service unit to function just like others do, or just like the unit used to do things, or perhaps how an adjoining Federal agency (U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management or the National Park Service) does things.
- Collaborative partners may have unrealistic expectations about the Forest Service's capacity.

Similarly, collaborative partners working with the Forest Service can create expectations that are not realized for a number of reasons, such as:

- Volunteers may become fatigued and stop participating because, as volunteers, nothing holds them accountable to the collaborative effort, other than their good intentions.
- Participants who engage in a collaborative effort as part of their job may have it as an "add on" responsibility and not have the capacity to participate meaningfully.

- The financial and technical resources needed to run a collaborative group or complete a project may not be sufficient.
- The potential for key stakeholder groups to choose not to participate in a collaborative process—or even oppose it—may be underestimated.

External events, which are not in the control of the agency or the public, can also influence expectations. For example:

- Unforeseen events (like a bad fire season) throw everything awry.
- Funds that were thought to be available no longer are.
- Other agencies make decisions that shift the decision space.
- Court decisions might change what can be done.

It is therefore inevitable that there will be instances when a collaborative process fails to completely meet the expectations that it creates for itself. It is nobody's fault, and certainly not a reason to quit or never try to begin with; it is a natural outcome of complicated processes with multiple parties that play out over an extended time. Strategies for



In the heart of the Rocky Mountains, west of the continental divide and just south of the Canadian border, lies the 2.4 million acre Flathead National Forest, MT. (USDA Forest Service photo by Your Forests Your Future)

minimizing the impact when it happens include promptly informing your collaborative partners, explaining the reason for the outcome in a forthright manner, and jointly developing alternative paths for meeting the expectation or some variant of it.

Behaviors and Practices for Alignment

There are several things that participants can and should do at the beginning of a collaborative effort and throughout the effort to align expectations and develop group cohesion:

1. Individually articulate expectations for the collaborative effort—expectations of the process, relationships with other participants, issues, and potential outcomes.
2. Strive to clarify and understand each other's expectations.
3. Identify and discuss the gaps in expectations between those who are collaborating.
4. Generate ways to eliminate, close, or bridge the gaps in expectations, while recognizing that some differences in expectations cannot be resolved.
5. Follow through on a shared commitment to seek alignment where possible, and take actions collaboratively to bridge differences in expectations.
6. Take stock of expectations periodically throughout the collaborative effort.

Worksheets

Tools for Alignment

When collaborative groups meet, participants can use tools such as worksheets to identify their individual expectations and then share them with others. The worksheets featured on the following pages are examples that the National Collaboration Cadre members have used on field projects. They can be reproduced and used (and modified) to assist in helping collaborative partners articulate expectations, discover gaps in the expectations, and identify methods to bridge the gaps and bring better alignment.

NOTE: The three worksheets that follow focus on expectations related to a specific part of the collaborative effort, such as purpose, issues, process, participants and participation, and decisions/outcomes.

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Articulating Expectations

	You	Collaborative Partner(s)
What is Desired		
What is Not Desired		

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Identifying Gaps in Expectations

	You	Collaborative Partner(s)
Differences in What is Desired		
Differences in What is Not Desired		

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Discovering Ways to Bridge Gaps

	You	Collaborative Partner(s)
What Are You Willing to Change?		
Agreed Upon Actions to Bridge Gaps		

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