BETTER COMMUNICATION FOR EFFECTIVE DECISION MAKING WORKSHOP – SUMMARY REPORT

Bo-Rit Community Advisory Group Training
December 2, 2009 6-10 p.m.

Karen Firehock, Senior Associate at E² Inc., and Melinda Holland, Senior Facilitator at E² Inc., led a workshop on communication practice for members of the Bo-Rit Community Advisory Group (CAG or group). This summary includes notes taken during the workshop and some of the discussion points that took place during the hands-on exercises. The slide show presented during the workshop is attached to this report as a PDF, and the Kraybill Conflict Styles Inventory was handed out during the workshop.

Participants began by discussing their goals for the workshop concerning improved communication. Several members noted the challenge of keeping a consistent conversational thread going. Participants explained that, since members speak in the order in which their cards are put up, conversations do not necessarily happen in any particular order. Participants also expressed an interest in better understanding different styles of communication within the group to decrease the level of negative reactions or misunderstandings. Some participants also noted their concern that there is mistrust amongst group members as well as distrust of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) motives for the project. Another challenge mentioned was the presence of the media, which may deter participants from speaking freely because they fear their comments may be taken out of context.

Participants then completed an exercise on active listening. They noted how important it was to make eye contact, provide acknowledgement that the speaker has been heard and ask follow up questions to motivate the speaker to share more. Karen noted that, in a group setting, it also can be important for participants to show they are listening to a speaker. In response to the comment raised concerning the difficulty of following conversation threads, she suggested to the group chairs that, once someone raises an issue, the group chairs should ask others if their cards are on that topic and then call on those who wish to comment or discuss the present issue. The issue should then be concluded, tabled or moved to later in the agenda if needed, before an entirely new topic is taken up.

The group's next exercise was standing in relation to conflict. Participants positioned themselves near or far from the conflict (represented by Melinda). Each discussed why they stood where they did. Some noted that, when the conflict is "hot or very acrimonious," it can sometimes be good to step back and wait, allowing the situation to cool down before engaging. Others noted that, in some cases, the issue needs to be addressed head on when there is conflict, especially if it is an emergency or if not engaging could allow the conflict to worsen. Participants also discussed the fact that some members were more comfortable engaging in a conflict than others. The take-away message from this exercise is to recognize differences in others' conflict styles and to understand that not everyone engages in the same manner. It is also important to judge when to engage and when to step away or to wait. There is no one

correct style of conflict. This issue was explored further when participants completed the Kraybill Conflict Styles Inventory, which also includes tips for working with people who have different conflict styles (see the inventory handout for tips on engaging different conflict styles).

Participants completed a "best" and "worst" behaviors worksheet. Highlights offered by participants for *worst* behaviors included: talking all at once without listening, providing comments that were off-topic, making statements to individuals that were overly personal, coming to meetings unprepared, having meetings that were unfocused with many distractions during the meeting, making comments that were irrelevant or sarcastic, and interrupting others. Also noted were behaviors that implied focus on a singular agenda without regard for other issues and a lack of willingness to consider others' perspectives, or worse, behavior that might be interpreted as "backstabbing" when participants did not honestly communicate their real feelings or motives. Several participants and the group chairs noted that they felt exhausted and "beat up" after meetings where some of these behaviors were exhibited.

As their *best* behaviors, participants noted that they were talented, creative and able to make well-informed decisions. There is a sense of harmony and accomplishment when best behaviors are in play. Everyone is progress-oriented and working to achieve mutual goals. Discussions are collegial and people address each other as equals. Conversations do not feel stressful. At the end of the night, everyone is a survivor. Even when there is disagreement, people communicate that they care about the issues and each other, and everyone's views are expressed in the discussion. Conversations are focused and respectful.

Participants commented that they seem to exhibit "best" behaviors when there is a specific goal for the meeting and clear decisions that need to be made. More of the "worst" behaviors occur when the meeting's purpose is not clear and it appears to be a "free for all" agenda with no specific direction. A few participants noted that perhaps better attention to the agenda, clear goals and clearly delineating what decisions need to be made, as well as the timing and process for reaching decisions, could help the group to exhibit its best side.

Participants made individual lists of their highest aspirations. Highlights of these included:

- Respecting each other.
- Staying focused on tasks and working together.
- Discussing all aspects of a problem without losing perspective.
- Remaining open minded and seeking to be heard and validated.
- Trusting each other to make honest points even if they disagree with your ideas.
- Each member participating fully and openly.
- Asking others to share their perspectives instead of telling them what they think (e.g. Why do you feel that way, what did you mean by …).
- Engaging in an open, two-way dialogue between EPA and CAG so that participants understand the agency's needs and constraints better, this will improve trust.

The group learned participation theories and practice and then suggested communication principles for the CAG to follow.

- Agree to disagree and be patient.

- Try to keep decision items for the meetings when groups can engage in constructive dialogues, and limit e-mails to information sharing. (For more on how e-mails are often misunderstood, please see slide show.)
- Operate from a place of mutual respect by both EPA and CAG, do not attack.
- Seek to understand the limitations of EPA in making decisions and the role of the CAG in informing those decisions.
- Keep discussions on topic and with fewer tangents. (group chairs can also help the group with this).
- Hold meetings for specific purposes with detailed agendas and decision points.
- Reach conclusions on issues before moving on to the next topic.
- Begin meetings with any needed follow-up from past meetings; do not allow past issues to languish or be forgotten.
- Provide time to ask for items to be put on future agendas (and allow participants to also e-mail these requests).

The following topics were requested by workshop participants to be included in the summary report:

Media Strategy: Some committees have developed the following strategy to try to ensure that statements to the media are not misconstrued and that any perspectives shared with the media are already agreed to by the committee. They form a media subcommittee to manage communications between the committee and the media. This subcommittee works to draft statements about the decision or process and shares them with the full committee to ensure that statements to be made to the media accurately reflect the wishes of the group. Any inquiries from the media are referred to the media subcommittee. Since media often make requests for information with short deadlines, the media subcommittee is kept small (three people) to allow it to function efficiently. In times of tight deadlines, the subcommittee is authorized to respond to media requests quickly. However, issue statements should be drafted well in advance whenever possible to avoid reacting on the fly as much as possible.

E-mail protocol: Many groups establish an e-mail protocol to ensure that e-mails are productive. Following are tips to facilitate improved e-mail communications. These are sent to everyone who joins an e-mail list serve or group. It is important to establish a list of everyone who is allowed to post to this group (usually managed through a list serve).

1. **Tone:** Avoid name calling, curse words and foul language. Include common courtesies such as "please" and "thank you."
2. **Content:** In the subject line, clearly write the subject and indicate if e-mail is for your information (FYI) or action needed (Action). For example, Subject: FYI – Background Only: soil toxicity report or Subject: Action Needed – Agenda Item Requested on Soil Tests Next Meeting.
3. **Decision Items**: If a decision is needed on an issue, request that the issue be put on an agenda for a group discussion.
4. **Forwarding:** Do not forward an e-mail from anyone to any persons outside of the e-mail group without the authors' express permission. Similarly, do not forward e-mail chains to anyone outside of the official e-mail group.
5. **Targeted Communication:** If a subject concerns only one individual and not the entire group, send the e-mail directly to that person to avoid clogging up everyone's e-mail inbox. Similarly, do not hit "reply all" unless your e-mail response needs to be read by the entire group.

6. **Volume:** To keep e-mail volume manageable, try to bundle issues together to avoid sending multiple e-mails when one e-mail will do the job.
7. **Transparency:** Ensure that e-communication is open and transparent by sharing key points with the entire group.
8. **Agenda Requests:** When an issue concerns an agenda request, send it directly to the group chairs. Group chairs should respond as to whether the item can be added. If not, say why not. If yes, say when and how.
9. **Those who repeatedly violate these protocols may be removed from the list.** (This is usually done within a moderated list when someone has the authority to do so.)

Meeting Agendas: Agendas should be clear about what is intended and how the meeting will inform the overall process. It is recommended that an overall schedule and work plan be completed first. Each agenda can then be tagged to a specific task in the workplan. Participants in the Bo-Rit CAG also suggested that it would be more productive to avoid holding meetings unless there is a specific task or outcome needed.

At the top of every agenda, include a summary statement that describes the purpose of the meeting. The purpose should be discrete and task oriented, as opposed to simply information sharing.

1. Topics should be listed in the agenda with approximate times allocated for each discussion. Agenda items should specify whether a decision will be needed. Even for those items that concern a presentation of a report or findings, the agenda should clearly describe why this information is being presented and how it will inform the process or lead to a decision during the meeting or at a later date.

2. Each decision item must be addressed and decided before moving to the next agenda item. Decisions should be clearly recorded.

3. There must also be a clearly defined process for what constitutes agreement or disagreement. At the end of the evening, major decisions should be quickly re-capped by the group chairs.

4. At the end of the meetings, new business may be requested for the next meeting (or by e-mail to the group chairs).

5. Anyone who wishes to make announcements or other points not on the agenda may request time to do so at the end of the meeting. Time should be set aside for such announcements in every agenda.