



# Collaboration as a Pursuit of Progress



*Located in western Wyoming, the Bridger-Teton offers more than 3.4 million acres of public land for your outdoor recreation enjoyment. (USDA Forest Service photo by Pattiz Brothers)*

## How Can You Tell If a Collaborative Effort Is Working?

This simple question is increasingly important as the Forest Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and other land management agencies turn to collaboration as a way to address complex and controversial situations. However simple it appears, answering it is surprisingly elusive.

Some people tend to ask if collaboration has **succeeded**; politicians and the news media seem particularly fond of this question, as if they are looking for a quick headline.

The question usually means

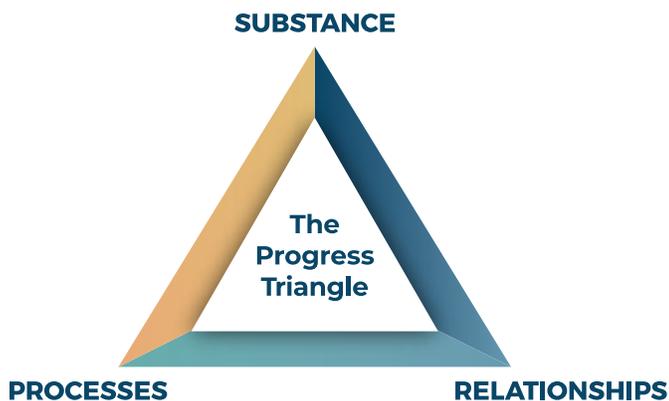
1. Was agreement reached over the issues (like a forest restoration activity)? and
2. Were all of the parties' interests met (does everyone like our new wildland-urban interface fire strategy)?

Framing success with these simple terms turns out to be a less than useful way to think about collaboration. "Success" creates a very episodic mindset—once you succeed, then you are presumably done. That might be appropriate if you are trying to resolve a labor union strike or craft a treaty to end a war—the agreement is the success. But such a mindset may not fit when the fundamental purpose is to manage complex landscapes over the long run. We are unlikely to "succeed" at eliminating invasive species once and for all or reversing the impact of decades of fire suppression anytime soon (see sidebar). In both of these cases—as in many others—management decisions need to be monitored constantly and modified to adapt to changing conditions (social and ecological), human activities, scientific knowledge, and technology. So, while success makes sense when thinking about short-term outcomes or interim benchmarks, it may be limiting when working toward longer term goals like sustainability and ecosystem resilience.

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](mailto:sharon.timko@usda.gov).

A better frame of reference for thinking about natural resource collaboration is to ask what **progress** is being made. Invoking “progress” implies that even though important agreements might have been reached and implemented so far, important work inevitably remains to be done. It recognizes that we are in this for the long term and making whatever progress we can initially is all we can reasonably hope to do; we can then turn our attention to other issues and efforts. A “making progress” mindset recognizes that constructive collaboration needs to be an ongoing component of public lands management, rather than an occasional or intermittent behavior.

It is also useful to deconstruct the broad notion of progress into three more specific types of progress: (1) **substance**, (2) **processes**, and (3) **relationships** (fig. 1). Substantive progress is defined by the convening issues for the collaboration—the need for vegetation management to address fire risk, the decline of local industries, an insect and disease outbreak, and so on. Procedural progress is defined by how well the inner workings of the collaboration are going: whether a formal collaborative group will be established (e.g., charter developed), how decisions will be made, has a clear focus or mission of the collaboration effort been identified, and so on. The relationship progress is defined by how willing individuals are to participate, what the level of trust or distrust is between key parties, and how well collaborative efforts have gone in the past.



**Figure 1.** *The Progress Triangle involves three types of progress: (1) substance, (2) processes, and (3) relationships. (Source: Daniels and Walker, 2001)*

Even though making progress on substance is critical and is the primary reason for collaboration, having a laser focus only on it and ignoring the other forms of progress is risky. The Progress Triangle’s shape reinforces the essential nature of relationships and processes in achieving meaningful progress on substance—they are the foundation upon which meaningful progress on the substantive issues is built.



*Shasta-Trinity National Forest, CA, engine crew patrol for spot fires adjacent to structures during the initial attack of the Carr Fire. (USDA Forest Service photo by Brenna Jones)*

A community-scale taskforce in one of the Pacific Coast States was meeting to formulate and implement a fire risk reduction strategy for its wildland-urban interface. The taskforce had all the right people—from Federal agency personnel, State fire personnel, local residents, and elected officials, as well as all of the necessary information needed to craft an appropriate strategy. Even so, the group could not get much momentum because they had framed their mission as successfully eliminating fire risk throughout the community. But no matter what they proposed, the fire experts said there would still be some level of risk given the layout of the community and the forest types that bordered it. The taskforce reframed its task to “how much progress can be made in the next 18 months” and that freed them up to make priority choices and to address critical opportunities, knowing full well that there would still be important work left to be done.

Taking time to really get to know people, to learn about their concerns, hopes, skepticisms, and their history working with the Forest Service will go a long way towards building trust and will help to seed innovation. Learning to work together in an authentic pursuit of mutual gains results in a shared understanding and in turn can yield substantive progress that no one would have thought possible.

## Techniques for Building a Strong Foundation for Collaboration

### Relationships

Spend some time getting to know collaborative partners as people; understand their history, values, families, and pastimes.

Share informal time together (like meals), in addition to formal work together with rigid agendas and deliverable outcomes.

Celebrate accomplishments and events that are important to the participants, even if they are not directly relevant to the mission of the collaborative group.

Seek a participant mix that includes a broad diversity of the relevant stakeholders; encourage reluctant yet relevant parties.



*The Southwestern Crown of the Continent Project in the Helena-Lewis and Clark, Flathead, and Lolo National Forests, MT. Photo of trout genetic sampling on a tributary of Beaver Creek. (USDA Forest Service photo by Swan Lake Ranger District, Flathead National Forest)*

### Procedures

Start with “Meeting Zero” before the first gathering where substantive issues are going to be addressed. Devote a meeting to developing how you are going to work together.

Draw upon the many good examples and constructive tools of collaborative processes and structures (like ground rules and bylaws) as templates within your efforts, but do not be afraid to try something completely new and innovative if your situation calls for it.

Periodically “take stock” and devote part of a meeting to looking at how things are going in terms of relationships and procedures and seeing if there are opportunities for improvement.

### Substance

Break the group’s overall purpose into specific projects or milestones that can be readily undertaken given the resources and capacity of the participants.

Identify clear performance metrics: how will you measure, monitor, and communicate the accomplishments your group has achieved?

Celebrate interim accomplishments that are stepping stones to your larger goals.

## Resources

Daniels, Steven E.; Walker, Gregg B. 2001. Working through environmental conflict: The collaborative learning approach. Westport, CT: Praeger.

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