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# Striving for Unanimity and Consensus: Finding the Common Ground in Conflict over Riparian Management

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## **Abstract**

*Dealing with natural resources conflicts creates an uncomfortable situation for many people. To successfully deal with the conflicts associated with riparian-area management, four points must be addressed: paradigms, strategic planning, decision-making, and implementation and monitoring. The paradigms of everyone involved in the resolution of the conflict must be understood. Strategic planning helps find the common ground of the people involved and reduces the misunderstandings. The decision-making method provides a mechanism to ensure that goals are addressed. Implementation of the decision is required but must be followed with monitoring. Monitoring ensures that the goals are met and that the plan is adjusted appropriately when the goals are not being met. These four areas help reduce the conflicts among people associated with riparian management by helping produce win/win agreements.*

## INTRODUCTION

Natural resources are managed by biological constraints and by society's objectives. As society changes, the uses and objectives for natural resources also change, which often leads to conflict. Conflict is a natural result of change. However, it is not pleasant to many people. This paper will provide a practical information base to help reduce the anxiety many people have about conflict. This information base has been gained by the practical experience of trying to implement management decisions on riparian zones and on many other natural resources situations. Understanding four key areas has helped me deal with managing conflicts. These four areas are paradigms,<sup>1</sup> strategic planning, decision-making, and implementation and monitoring.

The goal of resource or riparian managers is to make and then implement a decision, "a change." With public resources, this is done in a group or team setting. There are generally five approaches to

making this decision (Suhr 1990a):

1. Make no decision.
2. Arrive at a 9-1 decision.
3. Hold a democratic vote.
4. Develop a consensus.
5. Arrive at a unanimous vote.

Unanimity and consensus are results of decisions that are win/win. Everyone involved in these types of decisions feels as if he or she won something. Decisions reached through 9-1 or voting result in winners and losers. These types of decisions are generally not well supported and are less likely to be implemented or to succeed. To get the best management decisions implemented and to succeed, it is important to strive for unanimity and, as the next best choice, consensus.

Implementing changes that improve the resource situation is the objective. These positive changes can only be achieved with the involvement of people

<sup>1</sup>In this paper, the author uses the word *paradigm* to mean a set of beliefs (Covey 1989). *Ed.*

affected by that improvement. The best resource decision in the world can be made; but if the people who are going to make the change don't support that decision, it will never be implemented. At the same time, a good resource decision, supported by those who will implement the change, can be stopped by people who are affected by the change if they do not support it. Those affected can stop it through appeals. In a third scenario, the correct resource decision can be made and the people who are affected by the decision may support it; but it will not be implemented because the time is not right for it. The decision is out of sequence. A good resource decision needs to do the following (Suhr 1990b):

1. Have proper biological impact
2. Have the support of those implementing it
3. Have the support of those affected by it
4. Be in sequence

## PARADIGMS

Paradigms are maps of the world. They are how people view the world. They are the individual's reality. Different people's paradigms are different about the same subject. Paradigm differences are the primary source of all conflict. There are two phases to understanding and managing attitudes about paradigms. The first is to examine one's own paradigms. This examination will provide an understanding of those paradigms that are helping you and those that are not beneficial to you. The second phase is to determine the paradigms of the other people involved.

### DETERMINING YOUR PARADIGMS

To determine your paradigms you must determine how you feel about "things." Listen to yourself talk. The feelings expressed provide you with your paradigms. From my personal experience, the paradigms that provide the most unpleasant and unmanageable conflicts in my life are the following:

1. Change is bad.
2. Conflict is bad and needs to be avoided.
3. Subjects must be dealt with on a high level of abstraction.
4. Differences in opinion destroy teamwork.

5. There is only one correct answer.
6. There are right and wrong answers.
7. I have to find out what peoples' positions and issues are.

I have changed or am in the process of changing those paradigms to the following:

1. Change is good. Change is the only way humans progress. Without change we would still be riding a horse and using buggy whips. I have also found in myself that if I am either the instigator of change or a participant in deciding what the change is I feel much more comfortable with the change.
2. Conflict is good. Only conflict that is allowed to escalate to a point where the situation becomes completely destructive, as in a conflagration, is bad. Conflict, I realize, is a natural and logical part of change. If you change something, conflict will be a natural result. I look upon conflict as I look upon spring: it is a harbinger of progress and warmer and more productive days to come.
3. Thinking in low levels of abstraction is beneficial. Conflict and change are really neither good nor bad—they are both. When we think that conflict is either good or bad, it paints a picture of extremes. Therefore, thinking on a lower level of abstraction results in a conclusion that conflict is sometimes good and sometimes bad. This tactic helps calm things down in my own mind, and it helps me deal with things outside of myself.
4. Diversity of opinion—conflict—is essential to team building and effective teamwork. If you have a team of people that feels as you do, you are not as apt to build logical alternatives and to find the best solution. Team building and effective teamwork depend on honest, open discussions about important, sensitive points. Without that, teamwork never occurs.
5. There are always at least two answers—yours and the right one. If you think you hold the correct answer, you will not be open to someone else's alternative or to someone else's altering your idea. If you think there are always at least two answers—yours and the right one—you will be in a mode of discovery and in a better situation to find an answer.
6. There are no right or wrong answers. There are only effects, with some effects being more desir-

able than others. If you look upon potential answers as being right or wrong, every answer is wrong to someone. If you open up your mind to determining what the effects are, you will be choosing a course of action based on the most desirable effects. You will not be striving to find the nonexistent right answer. Your mind is freed from the destructive dichotomy of being right or wrong.

7. Finding out what peoples' interests are avoids a win/lose situation. I no longer ask people what their issues are. If you ask people their issues (their position), you are asking them to take a stand on an issue. Once a position is stated, any movement from this stand is likely to be thought of as a win or loss for the person holding the opinion. Once set up in the win/lose dichotomy, a person will do almost anything to win. Most are not likely to enjoy losing. On the other hand, an interest is just that—something a person is interested in. If you deal with someone's interest, you are more likely to avoid win/lose dichotomies.

Following is a summary of my progress producing paradigms:

1. Change is good, bad, and in between.
2. Conflict is good, bad, and in between.
3. Think in low levels of abstraction.
4. Diversity equals true teamwork and high productivity.
5. There are always at least two answers—yours and the right one.
6. Avoid dichotomous thinking.
7. Determine others' interests.

Two tenets to follow are: (1) there are only effects instead of right or wrong thinking; (2) there are only interests in place of win/lose position thinking.

With these paradigms in place, a person is put in a discovery mode when dealing with others. In a discovery mode, defensiveness is an unnecessary emotion. When someone says something that goes against your belief, there is no reason to be defensive if there is no vested interest. Remember, you are just trying to determine the other person's paradigms. In addition, there is less chance on your part to consciously or unconsciously avoid delicate, sensitive, or emotionally charged topics when you are in a discovery mode.

Human nature drives us to try to get along with

other humans. This desire is good in most cases except when we avoid conflict with other people at all costs. If you know an issue is an emotional one for a particular person, you can deduce that it may be that person's tendency to avoid talking about that issue. In riparian-management decisions, these issues will come up sooner or later; and if brought up later, often they stop the project.

Another advantage to having these paradigms is their tactical value. If you have the paradigm that "differences of opinion mean a stronger team," when a person brings up something to you in an argumentative way that goes against your belief you may easily say, "Good, you have a different opinion than I do." This attitude has many benefits. It shows you are open to another opinion without giving up your interest. Often the other person is expecting a different reaction and is shocked that you are not upset by the comment. This open-mindedness helps develop a working relationship within a group.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING

Strategic planning is used for two things. The first is to visualize where you are going so that you can take strategic, tactical action to arrive at a consensus or unanimity in your decision. The second is to visualize what the future is so that you can create a comfort zone to be used at those times in the future when your action will be required.

In order to bring this into focus, Lou Tice (1990), in "Investment in Excellence," made a point about a person's view of the world and how that view of the world can create the person's future. He used the metaphor of when a child is just learning to ride a bike and he sees a rock in his path on the sidewalk. Remember how *you* felt, how unsteady you were in the beginning? If you look at the rock in panic and focus on the rock, more than likely you will hit it. The point is: See the rock, but don't focus on it. See the rock; then quickly find a way around it; then focus on this new route. You will naturally steer around the rock.

With that as an example, the first step in strategic planning is to go through a "futuring" exercise to discover a way around the "rock." First, brainstorm the trends seen in your situation. In other words, if you are dealing with a riparian situation, ask the following questions:

1. What are the things that are happening regarding all parts of that riparian system?
2. What are the trends of the fish?

3. What are the trends of the livestock use?
4. What are the trends of the recreation use?

Everything affecting that riparian system must be addressed. In the second part of futuring, project each one of those trends into the future for some period of time, e.g., five or ten years. These trends and where you think they may go are called "the reference future." Examine the reference future. This is the "rock" to manage around. The next step is to formulate the "perfect future."

The perfect future is where you want to end up on the other side of the rock. The perfect future needs to be designed in relation to what you like and don't like in the reference future. It must be specific and written down. Now, with the perfect future, review the trends again. What needs to be changed in those trends to allow the perfect future to be reached? The changes become the route around the "rock." The specific actions, to change the trends, are the heart of the strategic plan.

Three things are needed to complete a strategic plan based on this type of futuring:

1. Contingency plans at decision points. If a decision is needed but you do not know what that decision is to be, develop contingency futures for all alternatives.
2. Documentation of decisions on who will do what.
3. Documentation of decisions on when and in what sequence things will be done.

From my experience, for strategic planning to be successful and beneficial time must be invested in team formation. Learn each team members' perspective and establish a personal relationship with him or her. Invest this time and it will pay off in the end. The second recommendation is to be extremely careful about who is invited to be on the team. This point is controversial because in public-resources management you may not have control over who will be on the team. It is easier to get people on a team than to get them off, particularly if things are falling apart. On my teams, I want people with a diversity of opinion (Again, because of the strength of diversity, I don't need four Mark Johnson's on my team), team workers, and people who are flexible but not limp.

Effective teams generally must work through four stages of teamwork (Blanchard 1990). These stages are: forming, storming, "norming," and performing. Some teams stop before they get to the performing stage because of unmanaged conflicts in the team setting.

During the forming stage, people are enthusiastic.

They are excited about what they are doing, they are meeting new people, they are interested in what they are doing, and there is a lot of energy. During storming they realize their interests are different from others in the group. This stage is when destructive conflicts can occur. A team must work its way through this period, often with the team leader taking control. In "norming" a team starts establishing working relationships. Synergy, energy, and some cooperation begin to develop. In the fourth stage, performing, the group knows its job and little must be done. The group members know how to react with one another and how to "synergize."

## DECISION-MAKING

The next important phase is decision-making. In my experience, conflicts become most apparent at this stage and caution must be used to keep them from escalating. I believe three things about decision-making:

1. Decisions matter because they are the starting points for actions that end in results. Results are based on a decision.
2. Decision methods matter. They range from those methods that depend on chance to the more sophisticated method developed by Ben Franklin (List the advantages and disadvantages) to more modern decision-making processes. Some of these are sound ways of making decisions, though many are unsound. Using an unsound decision process often leads to wrong answers and increased conflicts.
3. Different decisions require different methods. If you are making a decision between two of your favorite ice cream flavors, maybe a chance method is all right: it really doesn't matter because you will enjoy either flavor. If a decision is about a threatened or endangered species, a person's livelihood, or the future of a stream segment, a sound method will result in a good decision.

I am a profound advocate of a decision-making process known as "sound decision-making," which is also known as "choosing by advantages" (Suhr 1990a). This method is based on the foundation of alternatives being selected on the basis of the importance of the advantages. Methods that weigh both advantages and disadvantages can lead to double counting and selecting an improper alternative. Invariably, a disadvantage of one alternative is always an advantage of another.

tage of another alternative. Unsound methods can be a source of conflict rather than a tool to manage the conflict. The choosing-by-advantages process also manages interactions on an interest basis and does not set up adversarial positions. The focus is on the problem or situation—not on win/lose situations.

A good decision is categorized as one that (a) is a correct, long-term resource decision; (b) is a decision that the people who will effect the change support and will implement; (c) affected people will at least give grudging consent to but won't appeal; (d) is timely or properly sequenced (Suhr 1990b). A good decision that can be implemented has all of these characteristics.

## IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

The last phase of the riparian project is the implementation phase. This phase never ends, but conflicts are most likely to occur in the first five years after implementation. Major conflicts during this period are from words used and misunderstanding of those words, the lack of understanding about human planning and implementation, and obligating more time for implementation or monitoring than is available.

Be prepared to deal with misunderstandings about the consensus built around the riparian project. Just as people see the world differently, they also have different definitions for words, concepts, and theories. If you maintain the discovery attitude discussed earlier, you can manage the conflict and arrive at a resolution.

There are two types of planning and implementation:

1. God's way in which God plans it, sets it to work, and it runs perfectly. An example of this is a stream. If God sits up high and looks down and feels that there needs to be a stream somewhere, he plans it, creates it, and it runs perfectly.
2. The human way. Since humans are not God, we cannot plan perfectly for anything to run perfectly; so humans must design, test, and improve the plan over and over until it reaches acceptable nonperfection.

Any team member who does not know the human way of implementation is a potential source of conflict. Imagine thinking that a consensus has been reached but later finding it has been modified without your knowledge. Will there be a conflict? How to

manage around this "rock" is obvious. Just know this "rock" exists and be prepared. Keep people informed of changes that must be made because the plan will have to be improved.

I have experienced another paradigm shift through increased understanding of the human way of planning and implementation. This shift has to do with failure. My previous paradigm was that all failure is bad; but failure is a natural, normal, and perfectly successful application of change. When you test something, part of it is going to fail—unless you are God. This failure is only bad if no improvement results from the next attempt. If the first effort is improved upon, a failure is a success. Here is my paradigm shift: Failure improved upon is a good failure. A failure that is ignored and not learned from is bad. The more you learn from a failure and improve upon the failure, the better the failure is.

The third and major area of conflict to plan for and to avoid is to set up monitoring for only the most important interests in the consensus. Then commit only to the amount of monitoring that can actually be accomplished. There is a tendency to think we will be able to monitor more than we will. Even though Congress requires us to monitor, it rarely dedicates the money to this important task. Congress believes we plan and implement "God's way." Do not commit to more than can be done. This premise leads to another "total quality management" saying, which is, "Under promise, over deliver" (3M Corp. 1990). Promise to monitor only what can be done with available resources. Plan it—then do it.

## SUMMARY

I believe the lack of understanding of paradigms—both your own and others—is the basis of most destructive conflicts, which mimic conflagration: everything associated with it is damaged. To keep conflicts from escalating, we must deal with our own and others' paradigms. Strategic planning can be useful to help find common ground by avoiding unnecessary conflict and by assuring common understandings. The decision-making process can facilitate finding common ground. From my experience, the sound decision-making process (Suhr 1990a) is the easiest to use. Finally, the implementation phase has two major pitfalls that must be dealt with: misunderstandings during the planning period and a lack of understanding that there will be a need to refine a human decision. An understanding of these four key areas of conflict management—paradigms, strategic planning, decision-making, and implementation and monitoring—has helped me deal with the

conflicts I have faced in riparian and other resource-management decisions. These tools should help you to be more comfortable in dealing with conflict and to approach a conflict as an ally not as an enemy.

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