

Bay Area Collaborative: Model for Regional Utility Cooperation [Project #4157]

ORDER NUMBER: 4157

DATE AVAILABLE: Summer 2010

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS:

Edward Means, Sarina Sriboonlue, and Todd Anderson

OBJECTIVES:

The purpose of this project was to develop and apply sustainable collaboration models to four San Francisco Bay Area water utilities with applicability to the U.S. water utility community at large.

BACKGROUND:

Four water utilities in the San Francisco Bay Area initiated this Water Research Foundation Tailored Collaboration project: Contra Costa Water District, East Bay Municipal Utility District, San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, and Santa Clara Valley Water District. The concept for the Tailored Collaboration grew out of the longstanding relationships between senior managers of the four utilities. The informal interaction and collaboration of these individuals on behalf of their utilities produced recognizable benefits. However, these benefits were predicated on the personal relationships of the managers. The four recognized that establishing sustainable collaboration that would survive the absence of any of the four managers might benefit from greater formality and broader utility involvement. A model and process for collaboration was desired.

APPROACH:

The project approach involved the following:

- Research and summarization of case studies of regional collaboration, including the Bay Area Clean Water Agencies, Florida Workforce Initiative for the Water Sector, Kiwa Water Research, Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, and Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.
- A Steering Committee Framing Workshop to examine future trends, discuss the case studies, select “Areas of Focus” in which to seek regionally actionable initiatives, and determine the process model to follow.
- Establishment of Working Groups and assignment of White Paper Development for each of the areas of focus. The White Papers included goals and objectives of regional collaboration, alternative approaches, and an action plan.
- White Paper Review and Action Plan Development Workshop where the Steering Committee met with the Working Group members to discuss White Paper Findings and the action plan established for each area of focus.
- Working Group sessions to refine the action plan.

- Draft Action Plan Review Workshop where the Steering Committee met with the Working Group chairs to review the final action plan for each area of focus.
- Action Plan Finalization where the Working Groups incorporated recommendations of the Steering Committee into their action plan.
- Steering Committee adoption of Collaboration Framework.

RESULTS/CONCLUSIONS:

Four areas of focus were selected by the Bay Area Water Utility Operations Collaborative Steering Committee:

- Asset and Management
- Emergency Preparedness
- Water Quality
- Workforce Development

These four areas of focus represent key industry issues where the benefits of working together regionally to address common challenges are recognized by all four participating utilities.

For each of the four areas of focus, the Steering Committee established Working Groups to frame the opportunity for discussion and approval by the Steering Committee. Each Working Group developed a White Paper identifying goals, opportunities for collaboration, potential collaborative approaches, and an action plan. The number of participants in each of the Working Groups ranged from 20 for the Workforce Development area of focus to five for the Asset Management Working Group. Each Working Group was made up of participants with different roles and levels of responsibility within their respective utility as well as diverse personalities. A passionate Working Group “champion” is important.

Each of the four areas of focus had varying levels of parallel activity underway outside of this collaboration. These activities included informal and limited Bay Area water utility collaboration on asset management, exercise-focused collaboration on emergency preparedness, peer-to-peer interactions on water quality, and significant collaboration on workforce development.

The Bay Area utilities participating in this project used a structured method to reach consensus on a collaboration model that is informal at the Steering Committee level and more formally structured at the Working Group level (i.e., chartered with action plans). Under the model developed, the Steering Committee establishes and provides management and oversight of the activities of the Working Groups under its purview. Activities of the Working Groups are guided by an Annual Work Plan, a summary of planned deliverables, and resource commitments developed by each Working Group and approved by the Steering Committee. The Working Groups report back to the Steering Committee annually. Their progress reports may be written reports or presentations.

APPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS:

Key Observations on Successful Collaboration

- Collaboration can leverage the human, political, and financial capital of the participants. Collaborations can leverage knowledge, expertise, and funds; establish leadership and credibility with stakeholders (e.g., consumers and health authorities); avoid duplicate efforts among participating agencies; and improve grant funding likelihood.
- Collaborations should be sensitive to “territory.” Water utilities are natural monopolies and must exist in their respective local political, geographic, service area, and other contexts. Collaborations must similarly exist within those contexts; respecting that is critical to successful collaborations.
- Collaboration expands the perspective of the participants and involves learning and teaching.
- Trust and relationships are important in sustaining collaborations.
- Management must act as champions to ensure junior staff engages, and must dedicate the necessary resources—importantly in most cases, staff time—to ensure follow-through on regional commitments.
- Collaboration structures can range from formal to informal but the collaborative must share a vision and common ground.
- Establishing the decision-making/governance process and managing participant expectations is key.
- Collaborators should cultivate successors.
- Collaboration can be “infectious,” spinning off new relationships and opportunities for collaboration (as relationships and areas of common need develop).
- Large collaborations are typically difficult to sustain and do not lend themselves to quick action.
- Administrative costs can be high (e.g., staff time, travel) and need to be weighed against the benefits of collaboration.
- Working together can be challenging due to differences in philosophy, governmental structure, and the nature of the organizations.
- There needs to be a process to ensure the goals and objectives of the collaborative are serviced. Formal or informal reporting to a “parent body” should be maintained.

The research also identified three key factors that are important for utilities contemplating similar collaboration efforts: focus, formality, and finance.

Focus – Collaborating utilities need to be specific about the breadth and expectations for the collaboration. Establishing a common understanding of the purpose and expected outcomes of the collaboration helps ensure that the effort is sustainable and productive and, once objectives are accomplished, is either disbanded or re-energized as appropriate. In this study, for example, it was important for continued oversight of the Working Groups by the Steering Committee to ensure that the focus areas remained productive.

Formality – Collaborators must also reach consensus on the level of formality of the collaboration. Where collaborations benefit from “political” validation or approval, formalizing the effort in a Memorandum of Understanding or Charter including objectives, process, metrics, and the resources needed to effectively carry out the collaboration may be helpful. In this study, the Steering Committee favored a “semi-formal” four-utility collaboration approach characterized by a simple and flexible charter document signed by the collaborating senior managers of the four utilities. Work plans are developed by each Working Group and approved by the Steering Committee. Progress is reported out to the Steering Committee periodically.

Finance – Collaborators should have a common understanding of and commitment to supporting the resources required to deliver on expectations. This commitment may be direct (money) and indirect (labor of participating staff). At this stage in the Bay Area Collaborative, the Steering Committee favored in-kind time commitment (as opposed to funding for budget money for studies, for example). Regardless, funding will be required to accomplish some of the Bay Area Collaborative action plan deliverables in the future.

MULTIMEDIA:

The appendices are included on a CD-ROM packaged with the final report.

RESEARCH PARTNERS:

- East Bay Municipal Utility District
- Contra Costa Water District
- San Francisco Public Utilities Commission
- Santa Clara Valley Water District