

DESIGNING WORKSHOPS

by James L. Creighton

The term "workshops" is used for a wide variety of small meetings including small informal discussions, training sessions, and highly structured activities such as participation in simulation games. For the purposes of this article we will be concentrating on workshops which 1) are working sessions rather than simply discussions; and, 2) have a specific product in mind which it is the objective of the worker to complete. Examples of products which might be produced in workshops include:

- C Lists of problems perceived by the public that should be addressed by the study. These lists might also be prioritized in a workshop.
- C Broad conceptual alternatives which are seen by the public as possible ways to solve and identify problems.
- C Evaluation of a set of alternatives.
- C Lists of the critical impacts to be analyzed as part of the environmental and social impact analysis.
- C A single agreed-upon plan resulting from negotiations and evaluation of a range of alternatives.

WORKSHOP SIZE

Because the purpose of the workshop is to be a working session and provide maximum opportunities for interaction and negotiation, it is necessary to limit workshop size. The ideal workshop size is limited to approximately 12 to 15 participants. However, the need for workshop participation to be representative of the entire community usually creates pressures to enlarge participation resulting in a workshop size of 20 to 25 participants. Once the workshop size has reached 20 to 25 participants it is necessary that some of the activities be conducted in smaller discussion groups which report back to the larger group.

SELECTION OF WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

Since the number of participants in a workshop must be limited this immediately poses problems of representativeness as typically there are more than 25 to 30 individuals or interests that would like to be represented in a workshop. As a result, workshops can run the risk of appearing to leave some individuals or

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interests out unless a great deal of effort is exerted to select a representative group. Some of the methods which may be used to reduce the risk of people feeling excluded are:

- a. Repeated workshops: A workshop format can be designed which can be repeated as often as necessary allowing opportunities for everyone who wishes to participate to go through the same workshop experience.
- b. Daytime workshop/evening meeting: One approach to the problem of people feeling excluded is to conduct a daytime workshop, selecting representatives as carefully as possible to insure that the full range of values within the community is represented. Then the products produced during the daytime workshop are shared in an evening session to which everyone in the community is invited. In effect the workshop prepares a report which is then reviewed by everyone who wishes to participate, thus reducing the dangers that the workshop will be seen as consultation only with an elite group.
- c. Interest group selection: An alternative method is for the agency to conduct a careful analysis and try to describe the interests that it feels need to be represented in the workshop without selecting the particular individuals to represent that interest. Through consultation with the interests the agency then learns which individual the interests would like to have represent them. This reduces the risk that the agency may be seen as "stacking the deck" by selecting workshop participation only of individuals who support agency policies; but it will still not completely eliminate the dangers that some groups will feel unrepresented.

DURATION OF A WORKSHOP

Workshops can be run during a three-hour evening meeting, or on other occasions may run for six to eight hours during the day. The most intense form of workshop is, of course, the charrette which may run for many hours. Any workshop which is long enough that it cannot be held in evening hours runs greater risk of being perceived as nonrepresentative and limited to an elite group, since longer workshops immediately create problems of obtaining babysitters or getting off work for the period of time involved in the workshop.

TYPICAL WORKSHOP STRUCTURE

The typical workshop structure consists of three basic phases:

Orientation: During the orientation period the agency describes the purposes of the workshop, the structure of the workshop, and provides the public with sufficient information so that the public can complete the group activity which is to follow. This phase is usually as brief and succinct as possible.

Group Activity: This is the actual work period of the workshop during which the participants are broken into small groups to perform an assignment or participate in a simulation game or some other structured activity which will result in the desired product. The use of flip charts and selection of spokespersons and recorders by teams is a frequently used technique in conducting workshops.

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Group Discussion: Once the group activity has been completed and a product has been produced (although frequently in a raw, undigested form), a period follows during which the group can discuss the product it has produced, evaluate it, and possibly place some priority on which items they consider to be most important.

STEPS IN DESIGNING A WORKSHOP

The follow steps are useful in designing a workshop:

1. Identify the desired product: In this step you identify precisely what the product is that should result from the workshop, such as a set of alternatives, a ranking of alternatives, a list of impacts which should be evaluated as part of the environmental and social impact analysis.
2. Identify the resource information the public will need: If citizens are to help you in developing alternatives, evaluating alternatives, or identifying impacts, there is certain basic information they will need in order to give you their responses. This information should be prepared in a simple understandable format, written in layman's language so that the least amount of workshop time will be spent by the participants in locating the information that they need. Frequently this material is included in a small workbook which also contains team assignments, exercise instructions, and other background material on the study. Careful preparation of this resource material is one of the most important tasks in workshop design prior to conducting the workshop itself. If this material is presented in confusing, complex, or over-detailed form it will substantially impede the workshop itself.
3. Select or design a series of activities which will result in the desired product. In some cases there may be previously used workshop formats which will result in the desired product. If not, it will be necessary for you to design a set of activities which will produce the needed materials. The usual technique is to write simple clear instructions for group activities and give the groups substantial responsibility, both in how the activity is completed and the product which is produced. A case history showing the complete design of a workshop is provided below to provide further guidance which will assist you in designing activities.
4. Design simple mechanisms for evaluating workshop product. Once participants have worked together to develop long lists of possible problems or alternative solutions or probable impacts, there is a final need for participants to evaluate the products that have been produced or to place some priority as to which are most significant. Without an opportunity to evaluate, participants may feel restricted by the workshop format or feel that all the points in the workshop are receiving equal value regardless of relative merit. This evaluation could include completion of a written response form, ranking items in a priority list, utilizing a straw vote, or utilizing a weighted voting system based on the highest priorities (as is used in the nominal group process). Without some opportunities for evaluation, citizens are likely to

feel incomplete at the end of the workshop and may be concerned that all the evaluation is left to the discretion of agency staff, with the risk that some of their deepest concerns and priorities may not receive the same value that they would have assigned to them.

A WORKSHOP CASE STUDY

The case study presented here is a description of a series of workshops conducted by a regional office of the U.S. Water & Power Resources Service on a study of future water supply needs for four counties.

The desired product to result from the workshops was a set of scenarios--short word-pictures of possible futures which could occur in the study area. Because of the large geographical area covered by the study, it was entirely possible that the futures foreseen in one county would be different than the futures foreseen in the adjoining county.

Prior to the workshops a series of meetings was held in each county with representatives of local city and county agencies as well as identifiable leaders of organized groups. One of the items covered in these meetings was to solicit recommendations as to the individuals who would participate in the first round of workshops. In seeking these recommendations the agency clearly established that it was mandatory that the workshop participation be balanced among the various interests within the community and that a full range of values be included. Based on these recommendations invitations were sent to the recommended individuals with the provision that the individual invited could select someone else to attend in their place if they did not wish to participate. In addition, it was publicly announced both that the workshops were going on and that there would be a second round of workshops which would be open to anybody who wished to participate, as well as a series of evening meetings for those who were unable to participate in the workshops.

Prior to the workshop a "dry run" workshop was conducted with internal planning staff. This workshop served to clarify those portions of the workshop design which were particularly effective and those portions which required further work before they could be used with the general public.

A short workbook was prepared with information on the study, the planning process which was to be used in the study, the workshop agenda including all assignments, and basic data such as existing population projections, estimates of land under irrigation, water required for fish and wildlife, and industrial usage for each major new factory or power plant. These workbooks were sent out several weeks in advance along with the initial invitation inviting participation in the workshop. In addition, graphics were prepared which displayed the planning procedures to be used in the study as well as the public participation activities anticipated for the entire study.

The workshop itself was designed as an entire day's activity, beginning at nine in the morning and ending at four in the afternoon. In the first round of workshops, one workshop was conducted in the County Seat of each of the four counties in the study. The workshop was conducted in meeting facilities which allowed participants to gather around tables for general sessions and break into small discussion groups for the team assignments. A flip chart was provided for each of the teams. Teams were assigned on a purely random basis using a simple counting-off system to insure that all participants of a single interest would not gather together in a single team.

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An opening orientation session was held in which the study was described, planning procedures detailed, future public involvement activities discussed, and the procedure for the workshop outlined. The teams were then established and assigned each to a corner of the room where they could gather around the flip charts. The team was assigned both of the tasks indicated below and asked to select a spokesperson who would then prepare a report of the team's results for the total group.

The two first team activities (as described in the workbook given to the participants) are shown below:

TEAM ACTIVITY: Identifying Factors Which Affect Development

Instructions: As a team make a list of those factors which will affect development in either your county or other counties in the four-county study area. These may be factors that either encourage or inhibit development. While we naturally want to identify the important factors, you need not worry about whether or not a particular factor is important enough to be included on the list--your team will assign priorities to these factors in a subsequent activity. Record your team list of factors on the form on the next page.

Time: 30 minutes

TEAM ACTIVITY: Evaluating the Importance of Each Factor

Instructions: As a team select the three factors you believe will be most significant in affecting development in the four-county region. Two criteria you may want to consider are: (1) Amount of impact--how much impact this factor will have if it changes or remains the same; (2) Likelihood--the probability that this impact will occur. Indicate your selection on the form on the next page. Then review the remaining factors, and assign them to the three categories: High Impact, Middle Impact, Low Impact. You will find yourself under time pressure, so regulate your time accordingly. At the end of the time, select a spokesperson who will present a report of your team's results to the total team.

Time: 45 minutes

The timing of the workshop was such that the team reports were presented shortly before the lunch period. During the luncheon period the teams' reports were consolidated and a proposal prepared for the group as to which themes would be developed further in the afternoon session. Immediately upon returning from lunch this proposal was discussed with the group, and in several occasions additions or changes were made. Once the themes had been selected the teams were then each assigned one of the themes and given the two team assignments indicated below.

TEAM ACTIVITY: Developing an Alternative Futures Scenario

THEME ASSIGNED TO TEAM: _____

Instructions: Develop a scenario--a little "scene"--describing the future development in your county based on the theme assigned your team. To do this you may wish to review the other factors which affect development in light of your theme. Or you may wish to develop your scenario intuitively. It should be sufficiently detailed in terms of population centers and industry that water demands can be developed from it.

Time: 1 hour

TEAM ACTIVITY: Estimating Water Needs

Instructions: As a team, develop your best guess of the amounts, quality, and location of water needs in your county in the year 1990 based on the scenario developed by your team. Potential water supply sources are listed on the following page.

Time: 30 minutes

Again reports were given by each of the teams on the scenarios they had developed and their estimates of water needs for their scenario. During this period it was possible for members in other teams to ask questions, point out assumptions that may not have been valid, or propose additional items that should have been included in the scenario.

In addition to receiving the workbook described above, each participant also received a "Hand-In Workbook" which allowed them to make comments on the materials developed by any of the teams. This "Hand-In Workbook" consisted of several mimeographed sheets containing such questions as:

- C "Were there factors which your team left out which you consider important?"
- C "Were there factors which you consider to be of significantly greater or lesser importance than did your team?"
- C "For what reasons?"
- C "Were there other themes you would like to have seen used as the basis for developing scenarios?"
- C "For what reasons?"
- C "Do you believe the scenarios developed accurately reflected the themes on which they were based?"
- C "What changes would you suggest?"
- C "In your opinion did the water demands developed for each scenario seem to make sense?"
- C "What changes would you make?"

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C "Are there any other water needs we did not identify today?"

C "Are there any other items you would particularly like us to examine as part of the study?"

In addition, the "Hand-In-Workbook" contained two simple scales which allowed participants to rate each of the scenarios which had been developed. These scales allowed participants to react both to the likelihood that a particular scenario would occur, but also express the degree to which they would be pleased or unhappy were that scenario to actually occur. These scales are shown on the next page. (The use of scales such as these by Federal agencies is subject to approval requirements from the Office of Management and Budget).

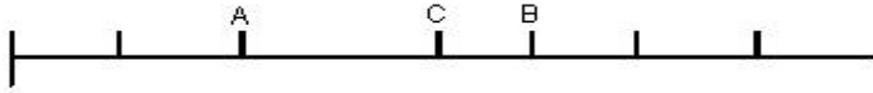
Finally, the workbook contained an evaluation form which allowed the participants to evaluate the workshop itself and also permitted them to give us suggestions as to individuals who might serve effectively on an advisory committee for their county.

REACTIONS TO ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

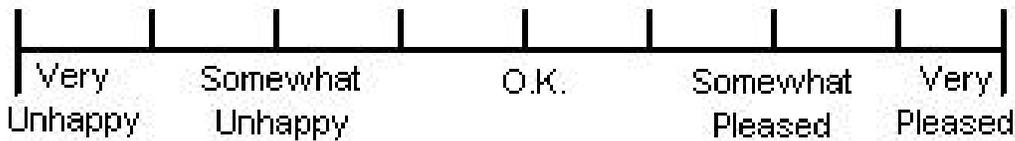
We are interested in your personal reactions to each of the alternative futures developed in the workshop. We would like you to react quickly to each of them on the simple scales below.

DIRECTIONS: Several scenarios were developed in this workshop based on the themes selected by the participants, and each was assigned a letter (Theme A, Theme B, etc.). On each of the scales below write in the letter which corresponds to your evaluation of that scenario.

For example



1. If this----- alternative future occurred I would feel:



2. I believe the likelihood of this alternative future actually occurring is:

