

Personal Commitment to Successful NEPA Collaboration

My last Shipley newsletter dealt with effective collaboration skills. A perceptive reader—Sid Allen, my former Shipley manager—noted that I had not emphasized the value of personal commitment to efficient team collaboration. The following newsletter corrects this omission.

For a copy of the prior newsletter go to www.Shipleygroup.com. Look up newsletter 101 (February 2014) under the Enews link from the menu of links across the top of the Home Page.

Personal commitment from every team member is essential for successful National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) project management.

All team members should agree on actions that will ensure that the NEPA team works efficiently on NEPA's process steps and on the required documents. Without such a commitment, NEPA teams will fail to meet project deadlines. NEPA documents will also be even more costly, whether prepared by internal agency teams or by hired contractors.

A resource specialist who cannot prepare good professional reports is not prepared to work on highly collaborative NEPA teams. Commitment to successful writing is another way of saying to scientific and technically trained specialists that skillful and powerful writing is just one of their professional duties.

Here is a preview of topics that define what I mean by personal commitment in a NEPA context:

- 1. Choose NEPA team members with a commitment to a successful and efficient team effort.**
- 2. Encourage team members to assess the efficiency of their traditional writing habits.**
- 3. Remind team members that compromises are essential to successful collaboration.**
- 4. Prepare a lessons-learned report on your team's successes and problems; circulate the report to other NEPA teams as they begin their analyses.**

Note that I am using "collaboration" in a narrow sense. I am talking about NEPA team collaboration. I am not including collaboration with other agencies or the public, as suggested in Section 1501.7 of the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations.

1. Choose NEPA team members with a commitment to a successful and efficient team effort.

Survey available resource specialists for those who are likely to be supportive NEPA team members. Look for specialists with good writing skills and with NEPA experience. But even more important, choose colleagues who can work well together.

Conduct a Google search on efficient project teams. You will discover that personal traits of team members are often more important than their expertise in their resource specialties. Consider two scenarios:

- **One assigned team member is a confirmed naysayer.** The naysayer's script includes "That's dumb," "That's crazy," or "Not in my lifetime." A naysayer's comments stifle team interaction.
- **One team member is positive and supportive.** This team member compliments ideas from other team members, often asking them for additional information. This team member listens well and paraphrases often. Compromises are welcomed as essential for team efficiency and success. See suggestion 3 below.

Teams with even a single naysayer often fail to achieve their assigned purpose. Most folks hate to attend meetings with a naysayer. So remind all team members, including any naysayers, that they collectively are responsible for successful team collaboration.

Teams with one or even several positive contributors are usually successful. Team members are committed to the goal that team collaboration be both successful and efficient. These team meetings are even sometimes pleasant!

Accept that not all colleagues will be supportive team members. Discuss your chosen team members with your or their managers. Your goal is that your team has as many positive members as possible.

If you are the NEPA project manager, accept your role as an active coach, both for NEPA process steps and for strategies that will improve a team member's writing skills. My assumption is that every NEPA team assignment is a learning experience, so coaching is always necessary. My assumption is based on two realities:

- **Every NEPA project has its own project features and constraints, so project details are not universally applicable.** Boilerplate text is often not useful or legally acceptable.
- **Available specialists are not always skillful and productive writers; and if they are good writers themselves, their skills may not support a highly collaborative team process.** Team members need to develop ways to practice useful collaboration techniques each time the team meets.

2. Encourage team members to assess the efficiency of their traditional writing habits.

Efficient writing means that writers draft text and graphics to fit into assigned pages. So, for example, a water quality specialist has an assignment to write a 5-page summary of direct and indirect impacts of the Proposed Action, No Action, and the Proposed Action Modified. Before beginning to write even a single word, the specialist knows the following crucial document givens:

- A page/screen layout design, with columns, margins, headers, footers, and white space
- Full headings and all subheadings for the 5 pages
- Emphasis strategies, such as a shaded box for highlighting impact conclusions
- Assigned space for projected graphics

- And most important: a page count target (as set by team collaboration)

Shipley consultants recommend that project teams create full storyboards as guides for writers to use as they prepare draft text and associated graphics. See Shipley Group newsletters 100 (October 2013) and 61 (November 2008) at www.Shipleygroup.com for more information about storyboards.

Efficient writers in today's computer era should create drafts that need little rewriting. Revisions, if needed, are minor, and essential content does not change from the vision captured in the storyboard.

How does today's efficient writing differ from traditional writing?

Traditional writers often start with many unknowns: no set page layout, no consistent headings or subheadings, unknown graphics, and no target length. The water quality specialist is given only a subject: Water Quality.

So the water quality specialist turns to her computer and begins brainstorming a draft report. Days later, the specialist has finished a 10-page, a 15-page, or a 30-page draft water quality report. Each of these draft versions is longer than needed, so who gets the task of summarizing the draft text?

Sometimes the NEPA team leader writes the summary. I do not recommend this option. Each specialist should write an acceptable draft summary!

As a recommended option, the original specialist is assigned to write a draft of the impacts summary. Often, however, a specialist will protest that the longer draft versions (mentioned above) are adequate and even legally necessary. A specialist sometimes even requests that her/his name not appear in the customary List of Preparers. This request is likely if the specialist believes that the new draft summary omits key resource information. (Here is where some sort of compromise would be helpful.)

Note that this traditional approach often requires expensive and frustrating revisions. Revisions usually include many changes to make all resource sections consistent with each other. Such late-stage revisions routinely add 20%, 30% or more both to the schedule and to the costs of required documents.

Traditional writing habits are often not as efficient as they should be. So specialists assigned to a NEPA project should be personally committed to the development of efficient and successful collaboration skills.

3. Remind team members that compromises are essential to successful collaboration.

Compromises are always present in a successful and efficient NEPA team process. This inevitability is why I link compromises with the concept of "personal commitment." Colleagues committed to successful team collaboration must rely on compromises from the first team meeting to the last. Potential compromises range from major decisions to the trivial.

Major decisions include key NEPA questions, such as these:

- What agency actions are properly included In the Proposed Action? What actions are excluded?
- What resource design features/mitigations are analyzed as included in the Proposed Action?
- Does the No Action Alternative have measurable impacts? Are such impacts simply the Existing Resource Conditions?
- What past actions are properly relevant for an adequate analysis of cumulative impacts?

Trivial questions also sometimes require compromises:

- Do we want to use a numbering system for our headings, as in 3.3.4 or 1.6.2?
- What font do we want to use for text? Do we want to use the same font for headings and subheadings?
- What about a somewhat narrower column of text, with space for callouts in the margin? What information should appear in callouts?
- Do we want to summarize impacts in a shaded callout box?

Compromises are appropriate for all such potential questions. Also, remember that one person's trivial question is likely someone else's major question.

What is one strategy for choosing to decide on a compromise?

Teams should consider how they want to arrive at a compromise. One imperfect answer goes with the loudest talker on the team.

A more productive approach is to draw two columns on a whiteboard or computer screen. Label one column **Pro** and the other one **Con**. Then ask the team to list their pro and con reasons. Be sure to take time for everyone's views. Perhaps then take a straw vote. Note that such a vote is not officially binding. The team leader or an agency manager may decide to preempt the choice of the voting majority.

Finally record a decision and a summary rationale. Remember that a recorded rationale is legally relevant for questions involving major NEPA process decisions. These rationales become part of the administrative record.

4. Prepare a lessons-learned report on your team's successes and problems; circulate the report to other NEPA teams as they begin their analyses.

Team members committed to efficient collaboration should be encouraged to pass lessons learned in their NEPA team process on to other NEPA teams. Without a recorded list of lessons learned, each new NEPA team will likely make the same mistakes made by earlier project teams!

Please contact the Shipley Group for assistance in any of these recommendations.