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Maintaining the Foundation of Collaborative Groups

Aligning the 4–Ps:
Purpose
People
Process
Products

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service is embracing an "Age of Collaboration" in its exercise of the National Environmental Policy Act and other Federal laws and regulations governing its decision processes. This collaborative age has been decades in the making. What began as a fledgling effort to increase public involvement by creating more meaningful ways of involving citizens has led to citizen collaboration in Federal land management.

One of the outcomes of this movement has been the growth in the number of citizens' collaborative groups who want to interact with the Forest Service on a wide array of topics. These citizens' collaborative groups should not to be confused with Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) committees. Non-FACA citizens' collaborative groups have been proliferating; these groups are self governing, independent, and voluntary. They come together to work with the Forest Service for a variety of purposes. These groups of stakeholders are not controlled by the Federal Government and are not subject to FACA.

Consider the commitment and sacrifice that these people make to become involved in collaborative efforts with the Forest Service. Often these collaborative groups meet regularly (e.g., monthly) in locations that may require several hours of travel to attend meetings. The cost of participation is generally funded by the individuals, their employers, or sponsoring organizations.

To develop a collaborative environment requires significant commitments of time, energy, and resources by all the individuals and groups involved, including the Forest Service. In short, collaboration does not happen without a significant investment of time, energy, and financial costs borne by all those who participate. Therefore, it is imperative that citizens' collaborative groups function as effectively and efficiently as possible to honor the time, investment, and commitment of those involved.

Forest restoration, Deschutes National Forest in central Oregon. USDA Forest Service photo.

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The foundation of most citizens' collaborative groups can be understood through the lens of the 4–P framework: PURPOSES, PEOPLE, PROCESS, and PRODUCTS.

The USDA Forest Service National Collaboration Cadre (Collaboration Cadre)[1] assists in organizing collaborative groups on a model entitled: "Building a Solid Foundation for Collaborative Efforts—the 4-P Foundation: Purposes, People, Process, and Products." The better the foundation is built, the better the stability and function of the collaborative effort. However, over time as situations change and participants come and go, the effectiveness of the collaborative group can diminish. When that begins to occur, participants intuitively know that something isn't right.

Something isn't right...

Some of the telltale signs may include:

- Participants lose interest.
- Purpose seems unclear.
- Progress isn't being made.
- There is little sense of accomplishment.
- Dissension increases.
- It isn't fun anymore.

When these signs begin to appear it is often because the Purposes, People, Process, Products have become misaligned; the 4–Ps are no longer working with one another and may be working against one another. It is probably time to examine the alignment of the foundational elements, identify the problems and implement corrective measures.

What is meant by the alignment of the 4–Ps?

Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest in Montana. USDA Forest Service photo.

[1]The USDA Forest Service National Collaboration Cadre works with national forests, communities, collaborative groups, and interested stakeholders to help them engage in effective collaboration. For more information regarding this Forest Service resource, please contact Sharon Timko at sharon.timko@usda.gov.

Effective Alignment

Proper Relationship of All Components

The Power of Alignment

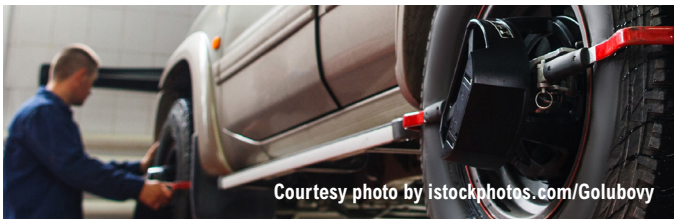
Alignment is the optimal condition where the key elements of a citizens' collaborative group—Purposes, People, Process, and Products—are in sync and integrated to work in concert with each other.

Participants in aligned groups have a clear line of sight about what needs doing, how to do it, who to do it with, and what the outcomes will likely be.

Aligned groups:

- Deliver consistent measurable progress in the attainment of objectives;
- Involve satisfied and engaged participants; and
- Make a positive difference and meet expectations all at the same time.

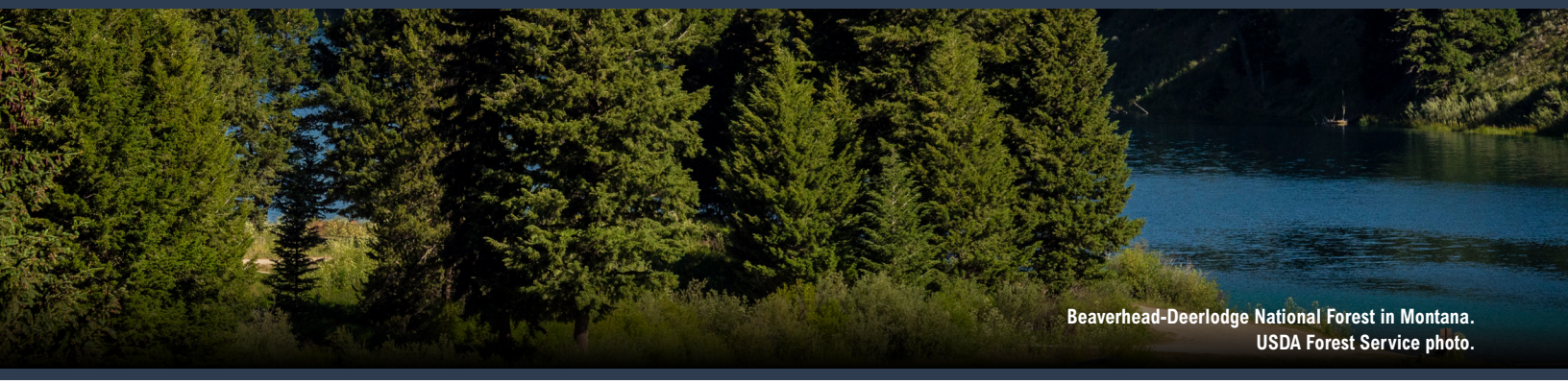
A way to understand this concept of alignment is to compare it to the alignment of the tires on your truck or car. When all four tires are aligned perfectly, they are all working with one another to assist the vehicle to run straight down the road effectively and efficiently. The ride will be smooth, the steering will be easy, the tires will last longer, and the fuel efficiency will increase.



Courtesy photo by istockphotos.com/Golubovy

Gradually over time, however, the tires begin to get out of alignment with one another due to road conditions, climate, and the wearing of parts. The misalignment usually occurs so gradually that it is imperceptible to the driver. Eventually, the driver may notice signs that things aren't quite right: the car or truck pulls to the left or the right, the tires are wearing unevenly, and the ride isn't as smooth as it once was when driven. The driver finally decides that it is time for an all-wheel tire alignment to get the vehicle running correctly again, so the driver takes it to a tire alignment facility, and a technician runs a 12-point check, identifies the problems, and corrects them putting the tires back into perfect alignment.

The same can be said of collaborative groups. Usually the misalignment of the four foundational building blocks of the collaborative group occurs so gradually that it is imperceptible to the participants, until the sign of wear begin to show and the participants notice that things don't seem quite right. When that happens, it's time to perform a 12-point check on the alignment of the 4-Ps (see fig. 1).



Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest in Montana.
USDA Forest Service photo.

Effective Alignment

The 12-Point Alignment

Proper alignment is important to the effectiveness and efficiency of the collaborative group. Periodic checks, perhaps annually, are as good an idea to collaborative groups as periodic tire alignments are to the car owner.

1. Are the desired **Products** aligned with the **Purposes**?
   - Does a product contribute to a larger plan?
   - Does a product address fundamental needs regarding the purpose or merely symptoms/indicators of it?

2. Are the **People** who are participating aligned with the **Purposes**?
   - Have the purposes been clearly communicated?
   - Are some people ideologically opposed to some of the purposes?
   - Are some people or organizations threatened by the purposes?

3. Is the **Process** aligned with achieving the **Products**?
   - Are the resources adequate?
   - Are the deadlines realistic?
   - Is there enough time for meaningful learning about the complexity of the situation?
   - Is the staff support and facilitation sufficient?

4. Are the **Products** aligned with the skills, experience, and authority of the **People**?
   - Do participants have the skills needed to achieve the products?
   - Are there adequate linkages to authority outside the group?

5. Are the **People** aligned with the **Process**?
   - Is there buy-in to the operating rules guiding the process?
   - Are the various roles clear?
   - Has leadership been clearly assigned and employed constructively?

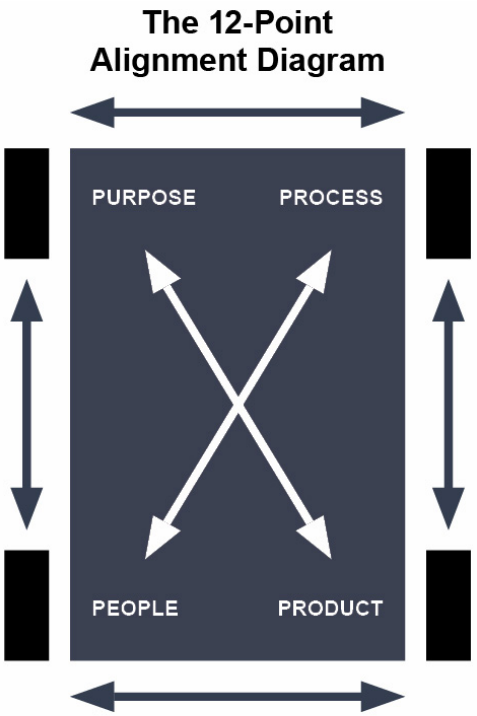


Figure 1. Car diagram showing a 12-point alignment check for collaborative groups.

See page 5 to print a worksheet designed to check your collaborative group's "alignment."

Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest in Montana. USDA Forest Service photo.

Alignment Challenges and Opportunities

Use this worksheet to check your collaborative group's alignment.

PURPOSE	PROCESS
Challenges: Opportunities:	Challenges: Opportunities:
PEOPLE	**PRODUCT**
Challenges: Opportunities:	Challenges: Opportunities: