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## Future Issues for Collaboration and Consensus Building Processes

[Suzanne Orenstein](#) November, 2008 CBI Reports

In 2006, CBI's founder, Larry Susskind, and CBI partner-consultant Suzanne Orenstein recognized that professionals who are working to apply various methods of consensus and collaboration on public issues need to come together to discuss commonalities and future directions among their various collaborative approaches. The group met in person and by conference call several times over two years, and produced a consensus vision for collaboration and agreement on principles and prerequisites for effective collaborative work.

In 2006, CBI's founder, Larry Susskind, and CBI partner-consultant Suzanne Orenstein recognized that professionals who are working to apply various methods of consensus and collaboration on public issues need to come together to discuss commonalities and future directions among their various collaborative approaches. Following a very successful Association for Conflict Resolution conference on deliberative democracy and its links to public policy consensus building, and in an effort to explore common approaches and principles, Susskind and Orenstein convened a group of leaders from organizations working to improve collaboration and consensus on public issues. The Working Group represents the first coalition between U.S. groups focused on public engagement, deliberative democracy, public policy dispute resolution, and alternative dispute resolution for legal disputes. The group met in person and by conference call several times over two years, and produced a consensus vision for collaboration and agreement on principles and prerequisites for effective collaborative work.

**Vision:** The vision of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Future of Collaboration and Consensus is for inclusive, effective, and fair collaboration to become a routine part of governance and civic life. Increasing the use of collaborative practices can help achieve a fairer and more inclusive society, which will strengthen democracy and result in better decision making and implementation.

**Mission:** The Ad Hoc Working Group includes professionals who represent diverse approaches to collaboration in public policy debates, but share a distinctive mission: helping people work together in the face of serious differences on issues of public importance. The Working Group has come together to advance the understanding and use of collaboration in the public sphere.

**Principles:** Bringing people together for constructive conversation about public issues is not new; indeed it is probably one of the oldest of human activities. There is a wide range of existing tools and processes for collaboration work in the public arena. The Working Group has identified several

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hallmarks of good collaborative process, which reflect the notion that creating forums for genuine communication, study, and collaborative work produces significant benefits.

Direct interaction and communication. Opportunities for constructive interaction are at the core of collaboration and dispute resolution. While communications and internet technologies help reach large numbers of people, they are usually best used to augment face-to-face dialogue and problem solving.

- **Diversity of views.** Inclusive approaches to participation make sure all points of view among those affected are welcome and encouraged. Extra effort is frequently needed to ensure that sufficiently diverse views are represented, giving everyone the confidence that the major perspectives will be thoroughly discussed.
  
- **“Done with, not done to.”** Collaboration creates forums where parties can work together voluntarily and have a voice in shaping the process itself. Suspicion and conflict are reduced if the structure and goals are transparent and not open to manipulation by one interest.
  
- **Timely information.** Timely information that is accessible, both in terms of availability and understanding, helps ensure that all parties are empowered to be full participants and that factual issues are resolved in ways that are expeditious and clear to all.
  
- **Mutually beneficial results.** Participants in any effort ask the basic question: does this outcome help achieve my goals? Collaborative efforts consciously work to ensure that the results are beneficial for all.
  
- **Focus on results and action.** A good collaborative process keeps participants focused on achieving sustainable results—whether that result is improved relationships or actions that resolve problems. Clarity about the purpose of the effort is critical to matching the process to the desired results.

**Approaches to Collaboration:** The Working Group recognized that the diversity and multiplicity of approaches and practices for building consensus and collaboration on public issues can be confusing to those who seek to sponsor or structure collaborative efforts for specific situations. Working Group members developed an overview spectrum of the purposes, outcomes and prerequisites for success for various approaches to collaboration. The spectrum is being used in education and discussion forums with Working Group organizations and professional groups and appears on page 3.

[Download [PDF version of CBI Reports Winter 2008](#) to view the Spectrum diagram.]

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**Collaboration on Public Issues in the Future:** There is a growing recognition that the roles for dialogue and collaboration about public concerns are going to expand in coming years. For example, action groups like AARP are using dialogue to build public consensus on economic and health policy in the US. Collaborative structures are being set up to help corporations and NGOs focus on addressing climate change. Expertise in structuring collaborative forums and conversations is and will be needed, whether through the use of impartial collaborative specialists, or through the skills of those working in the collaborative forums to self-guide the collaboration.

The range of methods for collaboration, as outlined in the spectrum of approaches to collaboration and consensus, allows multiple approaches, which can be tailored to very specific public issues. Designing forums to fit the collaboration needs in any public process is a complex task. The Ad Hoc Working Group members have pledged to provide guidance and support to public officials and others as they develop collaborative approaches for the public issues they face.