

Assessment process overview

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What is a collaborative-problem solving assessment?

A collaborative-problem solving assessment is an information-gathering process to better understand whether to proceed with a collaborative problem-solving (CPS) process and what that process might look like if you do move forward. You may also hear terms like conflict assessment, issue/situation assessment, or stakeholder analysis to describe this process.

No two conflicts or complex challenges are exactly alike. The assessment process must be tailored to the unique circumstances of each conflict, and in turn, will help uncover the nuances of the collaborative challenge you face. A well-structured and thorough assessment process is critical for setting a foundation for collaboration, problem-solving, and consensus building.

This handout outlines common features of an assessment process, gives tips for consideration, and a worksheet to help you prepare.

Purposes of assessment

- Better understand if CPS is a good fit for the issue given challenges and opportunities of CPS
- Determine the key stakeholders or parties impacted by the issue
- Understand the problem(s) you are trying to solve
- Understand what issues are important to parties
- Understand underlying interests, needs, and concerns
- Understand the conflict styles and communication styles of parties
- Really listen and begin to build trust
- Get a broader, more impartial view of the issue
- Understand power dynamics, cultural differences, and systemic societal issues involved
- Understand the degree of shared understanding around facts and technical information
- Understand any barriers to participation in a CPS process
- Begin to prepare participants for collaborative problem-solving, including what a successful process looks like
- Get input from participants on process design
- Build shared understanding by reporting out findings
- Understand timeframe and number of sessions that may be needed to resolve key issues
- Determine whether technical assistance would be helpful
- Identify what the final product should be (e.g., report, agreement, etc.)

When not to engage in a CPS process

Not all complex challenges should be resolved using CPS. If more than one of these considerations is present, it is important to think carefully about whether CPS is the best tool for conflict resolution:

- Few areas of potential agreement
- A key stakeholder refuses to participate
- Unrealistic deadline for reaching consensus
- Better option available (e.g., litigation)
- Convener wants to control process; facilitator not allowed to be autonomous
- Large power imbalances
- No way to fund consensus-building effort
- No pressure to collaborate or reach consensus (no deadline, no political mandate, lack of stakeholder interest, etc.)

Participant skepticism shouldn't be considered a reason not to proceed and should decrease as participants work the process.

Steps in the assessment process

1. Discuss assessment process and expectations with members of a leadership team, project champions, core project managers, or others who are advancing the CPS process.
2. Identify who will conduct the assessment. The person or team leading the assessment must be able to take an impartial approach to the assessment and have sufficient time to carry out the work.
3. Identify the methods you will use in the assessment process, how you will design the process, questions to include, and how you will report findings. You may want to develop a work plan for the assessment phase.
4. Identify the parties who should be interviewed or included in any other assessment approaches.
5. Invite parties to participate in the assessment process and schedule meetings. This may require an introduction by a sponsor or champion.
6. Carry out the assessment, making design adjustments as needed throughout the process.
7. Analyze assessment data.
8. Report out findings, with recommendations for next steps in the CPS process.

Assessment methods and considerations

Interviews

Interviewing key stakeholders is one of the most important tools for conducting a CPS assessment. Interviews allow for dialogue and exchange that generates helpful insights and begins to build trust and understanding in the CPS process. The number and length of interviews you conduct will depend on the

nature and complexity of the case. Generally, the more complex and difficult the impasse among parties, the more time you will want to spend in assessment.

Here are considerations for the interview process:

- Seek to hear from a balanced selection of representative viewpoints: different sides of the issue, people at different levels within an organizational hierarchy such as leadership and technical staff, people with different types of expertise, etc.
- Include parties who are impacted by the issue, have decision-making authority, and who could block or ensure implementation.
- Aim to be thorough but not exhaustive deciding how many people to interview.
- You may need to add people to the assessment based on what you learn during the process. It can be helpful to ask participants who else you should be talking to.

Other methods

Other methods that can be helpful for supplementing interviews include:

- **Document review/research** – it is often helpful to read reports, white papers, media stories, and other information on the issues involved.
- **Focus groups** – sometimes it is useful to bring individuals together for a group conversation.
- **Surveys** – surveys can be useful as a supplemental approach, keeping in mind that response you get may not be representative of the breadth of viewpoints on the issue. Be sure to consider survey bias in your approach.
- Other creative methods you can think of!

Transparency and confidentiality

- Be sure to explain exactly how you plan to use the information that is shared with you and at what level of detail. Address any questions or concerns from participants about engaging in the assessment process.
- If you are considering a CPS process:
 - it is likely the issues involved are sensitive, emotionally- and politically charged, and complex. Be empathetic, curious, and sensitive.
 - there can be history among the stakeholders involved or other dynamics you don't know about. Assume there are many things you will only find out in the course of the CPS process.
 - be careful not to share sensitive details from an assessment interview outside of that interview unless you have explicit permission to do so.
 - when reporting out findings, generalize to overarching observations and analysis that apply to the issue as a whole and avoid attributing comments to specific individuals.
- Remember that in public sector settings information is subject to the Data Practices Act. Be mindful of not promising confidentiality if this is not something you can guarantee.
- You are building trust and relationships throughout the assessment process. Take time to

describe the CPS process, your role, and open space for participants to raise concerns you haven't considered.

Example assessment interview questions

It is recommended to use a standardized set of questions for assessment interviews, while knowing that you may need to remain flexible and adapt to the direction of the conversation. Below are example questions, but you will likely only be able to talk through 5-10 questions depending on the length of your interview.

- What do you know about the current situation?
- Describe the level of conflict in the situation (1-10).
- What will be the impact of resolving this issue?
- Which aspects of the issue do you think will be most difficult to resolve?
- What could be done to improve relationship among people working on this issue?
- What, if anything has been tried to address these issues? Were the attempts successful or not? Why or why not?
- Any barriers to cooperation and/or collaboration? Or concerns or risks related to engaging in a collaborative problem-solving process?
- What are the areas of agreement (for improving things)?
- Who do you share values with?
- If [XX] were to change, what would that mean for you or your community?
- Are there diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, culture, power dynamics, or related concerns that may contribute to the conflict?
- Who needs to be part off this process to work on the issue successfully, either in generating or deciding on options or in implementing solutions
- Do you foresee any trainings needs for participants?
- Do you think there is a shared understanding of relevant data, science, Indigenous knowledge, etc. among participants? And if not, what areas would need further exploration together?
- Who do you see as trusted sources of information?
- What are some lessons learned from previous attempts to work on this issue?
- How long do you think we will need to effectively work together on solutions?
- Who will be important to the implementation of solutions we develop?
- Is there anything else you would like us to know?

Analyzing data from the assessment

In the analysis phase, sort through the data in a methodical way to synthesize findings:

- Look for themes and categories
- Assess the level of conflict, feasibility of a CPS process, and willingness of interviewed parties to participate
- Identify additional affected parties who need to participate in the process

- Analyze areas of agreement and disagreement
- Look at underlying interests and the range of perspectives
- Start to flesh out possible design options if a CPS process moves forward
- Take an impartial approach to the analysis; be self-aware of unintended biases you bring to the process

Reporting out

Most CPS assessment processes will include a report out of some sort. The length, format, and level of formality will depend on the circumstances. For some issues, it might be appropriate to report out via a short oral presentation. In other situations, a 20+ page formal report with subsection and references might be more useful. In weighing your options, consider the purposes of reporting out your assessment findings such as:

- Providing background information and analysis the group can use as they begin to problem solve.
- Presenting recommendations for next steps in the CPS process for people to react to.
- Reflecting all narratives to increase understanding of issue and move toward a shared narrative.
- Building trust with the CPS team and among parties by having transparent information and processes.
- Demonstrating that you have heard parties and sufficiently captured their concerns.
- Enabling joint fact finding.
- Getting feedback from parties and adjust your analysis if you are missing something.

Example report outline

- Background
 - Use the project background in the project profile as an introduction
 - Describe how many people were interviewed and timeframe for interviews.
 - Describe the goals of assessment and any limitations of the report.
- Priority issues and causes
 - Describe priority issues and their causes identified by stakeholders.
 - Desired goals
 - Describe stakeholder goals for the collaborative problem-solving process.
- Strengths of current situation (working well, areas of agreement)
 - Describe what's working well and areas of agreement and/or how things have been working better than in the past.
- Challenges to solving the problem
 - Describe barriers to cooperation or collaboration and concerns or risks for engaging in problem-solving process and/or how things have been working worse than in the past.
- Diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, or cultural concerns
 - Are there diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, culture, or related concerns that may contribute to the conflict or inform the path towards resolution?

- Other input
 - Describe any other input stakeholders have - internal/external stakeholders to invite, suggestions for the process, ideal timing, data needs, etc.
- Recommendations and next steps
 - Recommend one or more process design options to help get to resolution
 - Describe any immediate next steps that are recommended

References

- Rogers, Nancy, et. al. 2019. *Designing systems and process for managing disputes, second ed.* Wolters Kluwer, New York.
- Susskind, Lawrence, et. al. 1999. *The Consensus Building Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to Reaching Agreement.* Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California.