



مركز النهضة الاستراتيجي
Renaissance Strategic Center



MULTI-STAKEHOLDER STEERING- AND GOVERNANCE GROUPS: RENDER FUNDAMENTAL EXPECTATIONS OF BEHAVIOUR EXPLICIT


Collaborative Action for Collective Impact Series

Paper No - 3



النهضة العربية للديمقراطية والتنمية
Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development

2024



Over the years, I have observed multi-stakeholder ‘steering committees’ or ‘governance’ groups. These refer to, for example, the steering committee of a network of member organizations, the steering group of a particular collaborative project or program, or the governing council of an organizational entity that includes members from other organizations that have an interest in it. The functioning of such groups can be more or less formalized.

They are ‘multi-stakeholders’ because the members of that group are not there as independent individuals with no other connection to the network, program, or organizational entity, but because they come from an(other) organization with its self-centered interest in what is being steered. In other words, there always is a risk of ‘conflict of interest’.

An important characteristic of a multi-stakeholder group is that not one person or organization has formal authority over the others. Those different organizations that members of the multi-stakeholder group belong to, are independent. Not even the chair can simply ‘impose’ her or his will, or that of the ‘majority’.

Some such steering- or governance groups were very efficient and effective: thought was given to what should be on the agenda, and meetings were well prepared and chaired. And the decisions are clearly documented, with the core arguments and considerations underpinning them. Others were very inefficient because they did not do the above well.

However, a factor that can create real tensions and dysfunctionalities in a multi-stakeholder steering committee or governance group, are problematic behaviors of individuals in that group. Examples of problematic behaviors are

- Regularly coming unprepared to steering/governance group meetings, coming late, and/or only engaging with the agenda points that relate to the person’s individual or organizational interests, and disengaged on the rest, though that also relates to the collective interest.
- Sending out communications to the wider constituency, to push a decision in that person’s preferred direction, without prior discussion with the other members, or even with the chair.
- Continuing to oppose a decision made, by the steering group and even the wider constituency, that had been thoroughly discussed, and after all arguments were weighed for their merit.
- Regularly, even primarily, speaking for and defending the interests of the individual’s organization, rather than prioritizing the purpose of the collective and the collective interest.
- Constantly threatening to resign if the wider steering group and/or the wider constituency does not adopt the individual’s proposal.
- Disrespectful comments, within the steering or governance group, about other members, calling into question their legitimacy and integrity, without any ‘evidence’.
- Profiling their own organization at events where they were expected to represent and speak for the collective.
- Ignoring the clear intent and spirit of a formal agreement that seeks to coordinate each organization’s pursuit of its primary interests, in complementarity and not in competition, with an attitude that ‘if it is not explicitly ‘forbidden’ in the formal agreement, then I can do it’.

Such types of individual behaviors diminish the efficiency and effectiveness of collective leadership and -governance. Worse, they generate much negative energy and erode trust.

One individual behaving along these lines may not have much impact. But two or three, acting together, even if they are still a clear minority of members of the steering group, can throw the whole collective.

What I also observed is that the explicit ‘rules and procedures’ such steering/governing groups tend to have, typically are not useful to address such behaviors. Fundamental expectations tend to be left implicit.

Fundamental expectations are: that people who join such collective steering groups will do so in good faith, will prioritize the collective purpose over their own organizational or individual interests, will behave with basic respect towards other members, and will abide by majority decisions. This does not prevent someone from speaking from their individual and own organizational perspective: But there should be transparency with which ‘hat’ someone is speaking: ‘now I am speaking for myself’, ‘now I am speaking for my own organization’, ‘now I am speaking for the collective’. With the ‘hat of the collective’ being worn as normal headcover, and the other hats being put on only exceptionally, and then transparently. Such expectations tend to be taken for granted. They should not.

Time and again, as the explicit guidance of the group did not address what behavior is expected when multiple stakeholders work together to steer an organization, a process, or a network, towards a common goal, the collective struggled. More often than not, the situation became a ‘protracted crisis’, even if the chair of the group listened to the disruptive members and tried to diplomatically invite them to (also) work for the collective purpose, and maintain respect for others, even during disagreements.

In the cases I observed, that did not work. In the absence of an explicit reference to hold such behaviors accountable against, the situation only got ‘resolved’ when:

- The persons with the problematic behavior left the collective because of other reasons
- Other members of the collective that habitually worked for the shared purpose resigned out of frustration that there seemed no way to deal with the problematic behavior effectively. In practice, this meant that the collective was taken over by those who wanted to use it for their own interests. Often, the steering group could carry on then for quite some time, until new members started realizing what was really happening and resigned in turn. In the end the dysfunctionality led to inertia and the slow death of the collective effort.
- Wider constituencies turned away when they came to perceive the steering or governance group as inefficient, ineffective, and riddled with infighting. Again, the collective effort died.

My conclusion and advice: Unexpressed or insufficiently expressed expectations are often a factor in misunderstandings and tensions in social relations. In all our social relations, also within our families, which are another unit where we are expected to be acting for a shared purpose and common good. (Also within a family we will at times speak with our ‘individual hat’, but the family will not hold if, all or most of the time, we act with our ‘individual hat’.)

So render explicit the fundamental expectations you have about behaviours. Certainly, for a group of multi-stakeholder organizations that try to work together, this means ‘in writing’. Only then will you have a clear reference to hold someone accountable for disrespectful and counter-productive behaviours? To protect the integrity of your collective leadership.

Koenraad Van Brabant, co-director GMI

Global Mentoring Initiative (GMI) is a values-based and purpose-driven consultancy and advisory service. Collaboration, within and between organisations and with other stakeholders is one of our core competencies. Find other GMI insights and reports at www.gmentor.org

Creative Commons License Attribution: You can distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon this work if you credit GMI for the original creation.

Suggested citation: GMI May 2024: *Multi-stakeholder Steering- and Governance Groups: Render fundamental expectations of behaviour explicit.* Begnins, Switzerland

