

Collaborating for a Sustainable Water Future: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper describes the planning and implementation of a national sustainable water resources collaboration effort that began in 2008 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps led the initiative as facilitator, coordinator, integrator and convener in order to better articulate the roles and align the objectives across water agencies, stakeholders, interests, sectors, and levels of government. It encompassed facilitated conferences (three regional and one national), interviews of state and Federal agency representatives, and assessments of existing water plans. The approximately 350 conference attendees represented stakeholders from 40 states, 17 Federal agencies, four tribes, five universities, 12 interstate organizations, 22 non-government entities, and members of the House of Representatives. At the conferences, teams of facilitators used a variety of techniques to gather and prioritize information concerning key water resources challenges, best practices, roles and responsibilities, and opportunities to improve dialogue and collaboration to promote a sustainable water future. Conference participants were asked to complete a written evaluation indicating importance and satisfaction on various elements that included rating the small group facilitated discussions. Facilitators who work with both small and large groups to seek collaboration amidst strong and diverse opinions should find this topic of interest.

Editor's Note

This paper presents an interesting case study of a collaborative water futures effort facilitated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 2008-2009. This initiative included the use of large group and multi-stakeholder facilitation processes. These processes will be of particular interest to facilitators working in the areas of water care, community consultation and multi-stakeholder engagement. The paper also provides some insights into participant perceptions of collaboration processes.

Key Words

Case study, collaboration, evaluation, facilitation, fish bowl, importance, interviews, nominal group technique, outcomes, satisfaction, water planning, worksheet.

Background

Clean water has been described as the “new oil” in terms of being increasingly scarce and the basis for contention among competing users (World, 2009; Water International, 2008; and Berfield, 2008). Indeed, with both floods and drought, degraded water quality, increasing competition for water, and impacts of climate change, finding collaborative and sustainable solutions for managing water is of increasing importance.

This concern is not unique to the United States. Efforts in Australia include the TRaCK (Tropical Rivers and Coastal Knowledge) Collaborative Water Planning Project to understand the practice of collaborative water planning and the barriers and

enablers to effective public participation (Ayre, 2008). Efforts in Europe include a participatory water management planning case in The Netherlands in which stakeholders participated in meetings and workshops over a 2-year period to develop a regional water management plan (Lamers et. al., 2010).

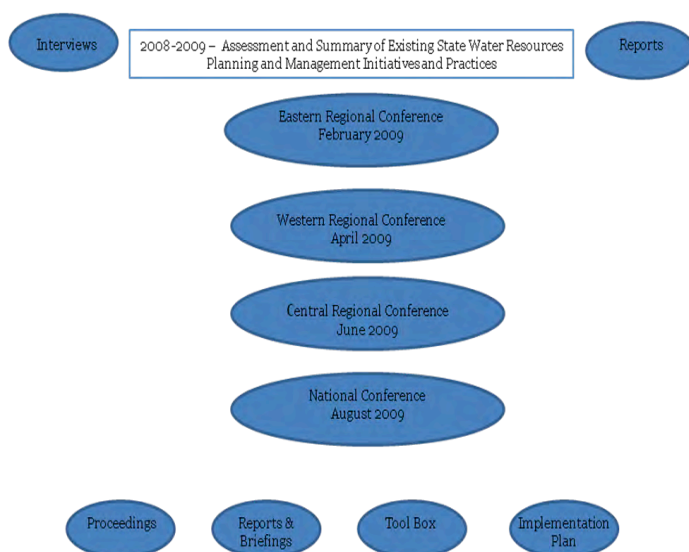
In 2008 - 2009, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) led an initiative as facilitator, coordinator, integrator and convener in order to better articulate the roles and align the objectives across water agencies, stakeholders, interests, sectors, and levels of government (see Figure 1). This included collaboration with Federal and State agencies, Native American Tribal

representatives (invited tribal members and associations representing multiple tribes), Interstate commissions, and Non-government (NGOs) entities. The effort focused on questions pertaining to:

- Greatest water resources needs
- Identification of water “hot spots”
- How to balance conflicting water needs
- Significant interstate issues
- Whether or not climate change was considered in planning efforts
- Best practices
- Impediments to successful water planning.

In addition to interviews and a national assessment of water planning, three regional conferences and one national conference were conducted to exchange ideas and information on water resources. Successful water resources collaborations are underway across the U.S. and this initiative provided a forum for compiling and sharing this information. The gatherings were also designed to see if collaborative, facilitated discussions could succeed in finding common ground for national priorities among participants with competing water needs. Approximately 350 individuals participated in the conferences.

Figure 1. Collaborative Water Resources Initiative Elements



Methodology and Approach

The *Collaborating for a Sustainable Water Future* initiative is intended to objectively review the water planning and

management efforts and needs of states, Federal agencies, and others, to share this information, and to seek diverse, collaborative input on how to address the nation's water challenges. Although the Corps served as the convener, care was taken to ensure that the conferences were perceived as collaboration conferences rather than Corps events through the use of printed materials, signage and briefings that identified the conference as a collaborative effort of equal partners. This was based on a Corps belief that integrated water management requires partners working in concert rather than being perceived as the responsibility of a single entity. Conference facilities that used “green” techniques such as minimizing disposable dishes, using water stations, and reducing laundry were selected to show commitment to water conservation.

Telephone Interviews and National Water Planning Assessment

As part of this effort, the water planning status of all 50 states was assessed during 2008 and 2009. Virtually all of the states had water planning representatives who participated in telephone interviews to verify and clarify existing water resources planning and management initiatives, practices and needs. In addition, existing reports, management plans and related documentation were reviewed.

Conferences

Forty-nine representatives of the Eastern region convened at a conference in Florida in February 2009, 80 representatives of the Western region convened in Kansas in April 2009, and 57 representatives of the Central region convened in Missouri in June 2009. Finally, 158 members of the Obama Administration, Federal and Congressional officials, and attendees representing states, interstate organizations, Tribes, and NGOs attended a national conference in Washington, D.C. in August 2009. Attendance was by invitation in order to foster better communication and collaboration in smaller groups, and to ensure attendance by a good cross-section of key water resources entities. Each conference was a mix of “state of the science” briefings, best practices and current water policies coupled with formal (facilitated sessions) and informal (receptions, luncheons) discussions on key topics. The three regional conferences were conducted in an iterative fashion in that key speakers from the other two regions presented water resources perspectives, best practices and lessons learned within their respective region to infuse diversity of planning and management strategies and cross-fertilize ideas. A team of individuals from across the Corps and from CDM assisted in the interviews, conferences and initial report preparation.

Facilitation Methods

Facilitation was deemed a necessary component of this initiative by the Corps in order to maximize the exchange of diverse

information and ideas, to capture input equitably, and to identify areas of both consensus and disagreement. In a recent study, the Veteran's Administration noted that "facilitation is a valuable and critical process of interactive problem-solving and support, which occurs in the context of a recognized need for improvement and a supportive interpersonal relationship" (Stetler et al., 2006). A team of experienced facilitators trained and guided a cadre of support facilitators (see Figure 3). Facilitation experience and formal training varied among the facilitators. It ranged from several years to several decades of experience and completion of formal training courses versus limited experience and no formal training.

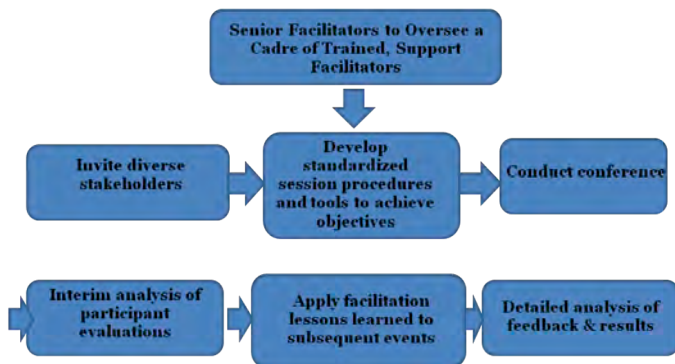


Figure 3. General Facilitation Process

Facilitated discussions were used to obtain desired information from the regional conference participants. Members of the facilitation support team were provided with written and verbal instructions prior to the conferences in the form of a standardized process guide outlining tasks, methods and timelines. It included guidance on the overall process, nominal group (Evaluation Research Team, 2006) and round robin feedback techniques (Wilkinson, 2004), consensus building (Wilkinson, 2004), verbal and weighted voting dots prioritization (Running, 2004), time management (designated times to accomplish specific tasks), and report out preparation whereby small groups shared their key findings using a standardized reporting format.

Regional Conferences

Three small group discussion breakout sessions were used to gather feedback from the regional conference participants. Prior to each session, a lead facilitator provided the participants with an overview to include: small group member composition and logistics, objectives and expectations of the session, and discussion guidelines [cell phones off, limit "war stories" (lengthy stories of related experiences) and acronymise (speaking in acronyms), etc.] The small groups were comprised of 6-12 members as determined by the number of attendees and available facilitators, along with a facilitator and a note-taker. The composition of the small groups was intentionally diverse

to allow individuals with different perspectives to learn and converse with each other.

Each group was requested to elect a group spokesperson (GSP) at the beginning of the session who would present their findings to the plenary group. During the session, participants were asked to use a nominal group technique to individually prepare notations on worksheets and then share their thoughts with the other attendees (Appendix A). This technique allowed each participant to gather their thoughts, determine items of greatest importance to communicate, and eliminate or endorse items from their list if another attendee addressed it. The use of nominal group technique and round robin feedback also helped ensure that each applicant had the opportunity to share their opinions and helped diffuse dominant personalities. Each breakout session lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours in length. Minor modifications were made to the worksheets, discussion time allotments, and GSPs based on learned lessons from participant feedback for subsequent regional conferences.

Small group discussion Session A dealt with *Key Water Resources Issues* and asked participants to provide feedback on critical water resources needs and challenges and their associated drivers and influences. Session B dealt with *Strategies to Address Current and Future Needs* and built upon the top three critical water resources needs or challenges identified in session A. Participants were requested to indicate strategies or tools currently being used to address the group's top three needs/challenges, along with additional strategies or tools they felt were needed to address them. Session C dealt with *Successful Collaborations* and requested feedback on: collaboration success stories, additional opportunities for successful collaboration/partnerships, and their perception of roles for each of Federal Government/Tribes, State Government, and Others (specified) in water resources planning and management.

Upon completing the individual worksheet in each session, participants were asked to share one concise example (newspaper headline versus a full page story) with the group using a round robin technique and recording on both paper charts and PowerPoint (PPT) slides. After the initial round, open discussion ensued during the time allotted to refine the results. The facilitator then worked with the group to consolidate similar ideas and used custom-printed, weighted voting dots (the highest value dot was placed on the item of greatest importance to them, one dot per item) to determine the top three ideas. Facilitators assured participants that all discussion notes and completed worksheets would be included in the proceedings reports. Where needed, additional agreement was obtained via general discussion or the use of thumbs (thumb up agree, thumb down disagree and discuss, flat hand neutral). The GSP then obtained guidance from the small group on how best to present their key results in PPT form to the plenary group. PPT templates were

used to standardize the format of key results across the small groups for comparison purposes.

The plenary group reconvened after each of the small group discussions to share results. Group spokespersons (GSPs) were assembled by a lead facilitator and given approximately 5 minutes each to share key highlights from their group. They were also asked to identify the members of their group and group members could contribute additional clarification as needed during the presentation. Plenary group members then asked additional questions on content and clarification. After each GSP had presented their results, the GSPs were asked to assemble in a fishbowl where participants sat in a small circle to share key findings while surrounded by the plenary group who observed their discussion (Fish Bowl, 2009). GSPs then shared their thoughts on similarities and differences observed in the report outs while the larger plenary group observed and then asked clarification questions of their own.

National Conference

The national conference began with presenting the results of the three regional conferences, along with insights from Congress and agencies involved with water planning and management such as: Bureau of Reclamation, Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Emergency Management Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, National Weather Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and U.S. Geologic Survey. The purposes of this conference included:

- Sharing the results of the state water planning assessments
- Sharing the results of feedback from stakeholders at the three regional conferences
- Providing opportunities for relationship building
- Hearing opinions about the need for a national water vision
- Learning of a proposed Federal Support Toolbox.

Facilitated sessions involved the plenary group and some plenary tabletop discussions. In the first session, a facilitator obtained feedback from the participants in a session titled *Collaborative Actions as a National Team – Next Steps* to identify next steps toward improving water planning collaboration. In the second session, a facilitator obtained feedback from the participants in a session titled *Key Regional Water Resources Needs and Strategic Actions to Move Toward Our Vision* to identify remaining regional needs and steps to address them. In both sessions, the 158 participants were seated at table rounds of eight and a plenary facilitator asked them to initiate a table discussion on the topic. Feedback was then shared with the plenary group and responses were recorded electronically. These sessions were approximately one hour in length.

Conference Evaluations

Each conference included an evaluation form (Appendix B) that requested participants to indicate the importance and satisfaction level for different aspects of the conference. This included:

- Meeting expectations
- Opportunities to speak with experts and share best practices
- Presentations
- The pre-conference interviews (if applicable)
- Facilitated sessions
- Logistics and facilities.

Participants were also given the opportunity to provide recommendations for improving the conferences and to provide a quotation on their overall assessment of the event/initiative.

Findings and Discussion

Participant feedback received during the interviews, states' assessment and conference components of *Collaborating for a Sustainable Water Future* highlighted the states' needs for more funding; for access to more current and comprehensive data and information; and for more defined roles and responsibilities in water resources planning and management. At each regional conference, the mixed participant groups provided copious amounts of data identifying needs, critical challenges, best practices, and roles. The facilitation design using standardized procedures and questions narrowed this to nine major overarching water resources themes as areas deserving action to facilitate more collaborative and effective management of our Nation's water resources. These included:

- Integrated water resources management
- Future National water resources direction
- Governance and management
- Collaboration
- Water resources investment strategies
- Managing extreme events
- Technology transfer and knowledge capacity building
- Enhanced water resources leadership and education.

Common needs determined regionally and nationally include:

- Funding support
- Sharing of data and information

- Addressing an aging infrastructure
- Support to reinforce Integrated Water Resources Management
- Technical assistance
- Demand for water quality and water supply
- Balancing competing demands
- Resolution of water rights
- Addressing policy, authority, legislation and regulatory needs including government fragmentation
- Promoting collaboration, coordination and communication among water resources stakeholders.

Additional insights were gained from participant feedback. An excerpt is provided (Table 1) showing results from the conference evaluations relative to overall satisfaction with the conferences and importance plus satisfaction with facilitated discussions. Ratings were based on a scale of 1-3 for importance

(1-Not Important, 2-Important, 3-Very Important), and on a scale of 1-3 for satisfaction (1-Unsatisfied, 2-Satisfied, 3-Very Satisfied). Average scores are indicated. Scores ranged from 1.93 to 2.84 for the Eastern conference; from 1.84 to 2.87 for the Western conference; from 1.53 to 2.75 for the Central conference, and from 1.69 to 2.77 for the National conference. Response rates for the three regional conferences ranged from 37-44%, but a response rate of 15% for the national conference was significantly lower. There was good overall satisfaction with all four conferences and with the facilitated discussions. The response rate was lower for the national conference and the overall evaluation scored was slightly lower than the regional conferences. The exact reasons for this are unknown, but may have been attributable to the presence of more local area attendees, and the presence of individuals who had attended one or more of the regional conferences at the national conference. In the latter instance, some of these participants expressed a desire to stop discussing and move to action in their evaluation and program comments.

Table 1. Overall Conference and Breakout Session Evaluations

Event	Category	Importance (1-3) Average Scores	Satisfaction (1-3) Average Scores	% Responding
Eastern	Overall		2.38	37%
	Breakouts	2.55	2.72	
Western	Overall		2.49	44%
	Breakouts	2.67	2.68	
Central	Overall		2.49	44%
	Breakouts	2.67	2.68	
National	Overall		2.12	15%
	Collaboration	2.50	2.33	
	Next Steps	2.57	2.27	

Written comments were insightful in determining the basis for participant evaluation scores. Feedback relative to the facilitation component is provided (C-Central, E-Eastern, W-Western, and N-National shown in order of conference date). These included positive comments such as:

E – All was good, breakout sessions were well facilitated.

E - The breakout groups were excellent. Learned a lot and got to know some people I wouldn't have otherwise.

W – Great organization (breakout, etc.) to hear issues.

W – Excellent opportunity to meet, debate, dialog on a common focus of water resources with a diverse collection of professional colleagues.

C – Very well organized and really moved along.

C - I am inspired by things I had not thought of.

N – I was pleasantly surprised at the quality and the participation at the conference.

N – An insight I had is that we need to move beyond the search for consensus to a more realistic commitment to pragmatically

link together based on common interests and create a positive, future-oriented vision.

Recommended improvement comments included:

E – A bit more time for discussion session A, less time for B, more time for C

E – For breakout groups, rotate the spokespersons. This could get new, different viewpoints emphasized.

W – Our facilitator did a fine job, but we were kept to defined, perhaps too narrow, questions.

W – Change group composition for each discussion session.

C – Would like less structure during breakout sessions, more time for free dialog with one another.

C – Needed more time to discuss successful strategies and collaborative opportunities.

N – I would have liked to see more interactive sessions and discussion groups and less talking heads.

N – You could have used more input on how to structure the discussions, the workshops were good.

Overall conference perception comments included:

E – Collaboration is not a luxury. It is a necessity and the conference helped emphasize this and provide varied views on how to best accomplish this.

E – What a lot of brainpower in one space! The Corps and CDM got it right.

W – A good step forward.

W – Though water does not respect political boundaries, people do respect each other through collaboration in sharing of its shortage and abundance.

C – This is by far the best forum of this type I have attended.

C – I am interested to see the results and products derived from this process.

N – Advances in technology promote greater connectivity and facilitate the ability and willingness to collaborate.

N – It is a start, but we have been saying that for years now. We need to do something!

Participants also placed high value on the open or facilitated discussion sessions at the regional conferences as revealed by their importance and satisfaction ratings for key elements of the workshops (Table 2). Informal facilitator feedback indicated that a lack of experience and formal training made it more

challenging for them to deal with dominant personalities, to rapidly capture feedback, to consolidate like ideas, and to adhere to the task timelines, but that the standardized process guide was beneficial in addressing these issues.

Table 2. Participant Discussion Importance Evaluations

Event	Eastern (1-3) Average Scores		Western (1-3) Average Scores		Central (1-3) Average Scores	
	Impt.	Satis.	Impt.	Satis.	Impt.	Satis.
Talk with Experts	2.84	2.33	2.65	2.69	2.55	2.56
Share best practices	2.82	2.35	2.68	2.47	2.48	2.37
See new approaches	2.83	2.38	2.68	2.50	2.57	2.42
Breakout sessions	2.68	2.68	2.67	2.68	2.58	2.72

Sam Kaner notes that “For multi-stakeholder collaboration, building mutual understanding is not optional; it is mandatory. So long as participants in collaboration have not acquired sufficient mutual understanding, their chance of success will be painfully low” (Kaner, 2005). The conferences were designed to bring key players in the world of water planning and management together to collaborate, share best practices, gain a better understanding of water challenges, concerns and perspectives and to build a common vision for the nation’s water future. They also helped build relationships between participants, a key ingredient for future partnerships and working together for similar aims. This included encouraging Federal agencies to work closely in support of the States’ needs and critical water priorities. In addition to speaker learning sessions, the participants were provided with both formal and informal venues for discussing water. Conducting conversations among very diverse stakeholders and decision-makers who had access to comprehensive water planning assessments was a unique opportunity.

Outcomes of the holistic initiative included: States’ water plan summaries describing their water resources planning and management activities, regional trends reports, conference proceedings, fact sheets, a Federal Agency Assessment report, a National Report with recommendations and actions and briefings. Some of these are posted at www.building-

collaboration-for-water.org. The implementation of proposed recommendations under nine overarching themes resulting from the effort is currently underway as water conversations and collaboration continue.

CONCLUSION

Facilitators, like many others, are often faced with the challenge of not having enough time, money or people to accomplish a task. They must seek ways to maximize the resources available and seek efficiencies in order to achieve targeted objectives when people are brought together. In this case study, standardized state agency interviews and assessments were conducted, and standardized facilitation procedures were used in a series of conferences to address key questions pertaining to water planning and management. The conference methodology included: verbal and written training information for the facilitation team, careful selection of conference attendees to ensure diverse representation, nominal group and fish bowl techniques, participant worksheets, small group discussions, and interspersing discussion sessions with learning sessions.

Careful documentation of feedback received and learning session presentations, along with written evaluation forms, were effective in accurately capturing and assessing the effort. With each progressive conference, learned lessons from participant feedback were incorporated to improve the process such as modifying the worksheets, changing group spokespersons, and modifying session times. At the national conference, two plenary facilitated sessions were used in between learning sessions. Although this was a significant effort, similar techniques could be used for smaller scale events in which standardized facilitation methodologies are used to ensure standardization across break out discussion groups and help guide less experienced facilitators.

Participant feedback provided key insights to the facilitators and reinforced their perception of disparate opinions and personalities in the groups. The facilitated small group discussion sessions of the regional conferences were highly rated, along with opportunities provided for open discussion. Providing participants with the written opportunity to recommend conference improvements or give their overall perception of the conference also revealed nuances that a standard, numeric evaluation form would not.

Potential improvements for similar efforts could include considering the impact of having some individuals attend multiple events with regard to repetition and a resulting desire to move beyond discussion to action, and increasing the length of small group discussions. In addition, the initiative revealed that more deliberate, comprehensive water planning is needed – intergovernmental by design – and founded on an appreciation of the interconnectivity among and between natural systems and

human activities. More collaborative planning, both transparent and inclusive, embracing the systems perspective of watersheds, river basins, estuaries and coastal reaches, is needed to realize the promise of concerted, integrated water resources management. One desired outcome almost universally expressed by participants in this dialogue is to better articulate the roles and align the objectives across disparate water agencies, stakeholders, interests, sectors and all levels of government; however, with full recognition of the primacy of state water rights and responsibilities.

The substantial amount of factual information gathered during this initiative was used to prepare four conference proceedings, states water planning assessments, a Federal agency assessment, and a National Report: Responding to National Water Resources Challenges (USACE, 2010). The regional reports included capturing best practices in collaborative water planning. Additional work is currently underway to develop a Federal Toolbox to compile and refine existing water planning and management tools, and to develop an implementation plan to address the identified challenges and needs. The Corps will continue to help advance the collaborative dialogue about the Nation's water challenges and the means to address them, and ideas and recommendations gained from this experience are being shared with decision makers.

Perhaps the best assessment of the overall initiative and its driving purpose was given by Mr. Steve Stockton, Corps Director of Civil Works, paraphrasing an old African proverb believed to be from Burkina Faso: *If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. Let's all go together in building a sustainable water future.*

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Appendix A – Small Group Discussion Topics

Small Group Discussion A

Please identify critical water resources needs and challenges and key drivers/influencing them.

Small Group Discussion B

Given the top 3 critical water resources needs and challenges you group identified in session A, please indicate strategies you are currently using to address these needs/challenges, and what additional strategies/tools you need to address them.

Small Group Discussion C

What is your best example of a successful collaborative initiative/activity? Specify:

- Name/title
- Time frame
- Lead agency and POC
- Water resources need/challenge context

- Partners
- Process used
- Challenges
- Outcomes

Where do you see additional opportunities for successful collaboration/partnerships? Describe:

- Water resources need/challenge and potential partners

What should be the roles of the Federal Government, State Government, and Others (Tribes, Tribal Councils, NGO's, Commissions/Councils, general public, etc.) in water resources planning and management?

Appendix B - Workshop Evaluation Form

Your feedback is critical to ensure that we are optimizing our collaborative workshops. Please take a few minutes to share your opinions with us.

Overall Workshop

Please rate each of the following 17 items in two ways:

- Importance Level - very important, important, unimportant
 - Satisfaction Level – very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied
1. Met Expectations
 2. Pre-Registration
 3. Lodging, facility
 4. Meeting Organization
 5. Pre-Workshop Interviews, etc. (if applicable)
 6. Climate Change Talk, USGS
 7. Policy Dialogues & Updates, AWRA
 8. Overview of States' Water Planning, CDM
 9. Luncheon Speaker – Western States
 10. Great Lakes Compact
 11. Plenary Panel

Sessions offered you an opportunity to:

12. Share Best Practices
13. See New Approaches
14. Talk with Experts

Additional Activities

15. Pre-Workshop Reception
16. Luncheon
17. Break out Sessions

Overall, how satisfied were you with the workshop?

___ Very Satisfied ___ Satisfied ___ Not Satisfied

What additional topics should be included in future seminars?

How might we improve future workshops?

You can say it better than we can! Please provide a quote that you feel sums up your workshop experience:

Optional:

Name:

Organization:

Thank you for sharing your time and thoughts with us.

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