

Evaluation for the Anthropocene: Consensus building

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Evaluation for the Anthropocene: Shaping a sustainability-ready evaluation field

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I want to share our expertise in consensus building and how what we do at CBI (Consensus Building Institute)¹ might link evaluation, sustainability, and coupled systems, around indigenous issues. Over the 25 years CBI has been in existence we and our founder, Dr Lawrence Susskind, have developed and honed a method of collaboration we call consensus building. Our work ranges from internationally complex multilateral global issues to local, community-specific disputes. We believe that no one person has wrapped their mind around—nor is the source of most or all insight on—almost all issues which involve having the technical expertise to understand natural systems in their interaction with humans and their social, cultural, political, and personal complexities. Hence, we believe in bringing together

1 <https://www.cbi.org/who-we-are/>

individuals with diverse perspectives, technical skill sets, interests, and even differing values to try to grasp and name the problem or problems at hand as well as create the possible options for resolution.

In general terms, our consensus building processes involved these steps: 1) assessment; 2) convening; 3) interest and value exploration; 4) problem definition; 5) option generation; 6) joint evaluation; 7) decision; and 8) evaluation and learning. While each of these steps could take up pages of explanation, in brief, here's a short explanation of each. Assessment in the process of consensus building is typically done by an independent non-partisan facilitator or mediator who speaks to those involved to understand better the players, issues, context, history, hopes, and fears of the party. From that assessment, a professional consensus builder works with the parties to propose and refine a collaborative process tailored to the situation. If the parties involved are amenable, the consensus builder works with the parties to convene a "representative table" of participants to dive into the issues together, often with a significant public-outreach component. Once in the process the parties, with the facilitative help of the consensus builder, seek to surface their underlying interests and needs, and jointly define the problem or problems to solve. The key here is the parties do this together as a collective enterprise, not as five, ten, or twenty separate parties clashing to advocate for only their view of things. Then, the parties work, sometimes with the help of experts, to explore a host of options and ideas that might solve the problems identified. Then and only then, the parties engage in a negotiation to see if they can reach an agreement to meet the interests of as many of the participants as possible, not in a 51% to 49% vote but seeking to bring all most into an agreement. Lastly, if and when agreement is reached, the parties also install an appropriate evaluation and learning approach to ensure their decisions can be reviewed, modified, and adapted as needed to changing conditions (Susskind, McKernan, & Thomas-Larmer, 1999).

Consensus building is not merely a technical and procedural manner. People are messy and groups are messy. Nature is often the central point around which the stakeholders and their worries revolve. Yet nature cannot easily come to the table. And who speaks for nature? And, in fact, who speaks for the community, since it may have both informal and formal governance or leadership and the community itself may have multiple views. Thus, our job as consensus builders is try and harness both this complexity and diversity in a way that together, through various structures, norms, expectations, and work, the parties can find their way together through the thicket.

One key concept here is the idea of stakeholders and rights holders. A stakeholder is any individual, group, or government who might claim a stake in an issue. That stake might be merely concern (e.g., I love the presence of bald eagles though I live thousands of miles away) to a direct legal stake in the resource (e.g., I own the land where the bald eagles are nesting). Rights holders is a related but distinct and important concept. It is the notion that some groups, particularly indigenous groups, do not merely have a stake, but a clear set of rights established by treaty, statute, or case law. Rights holders see themselves as having a particular, legally-supported, and higher order stake.

One of our tools is joint fact finding. Often, stakeholders and rights holders do not even agree on the facts surrounding an issue (e.g., how many caribou are in that herd, and what are the trends in population over time? What are their migration patterns appearing to change?). Indigenous or traditional knowledge is often essential. While studies, graphs, and the scientific method can be powerful in elucidating problems, numbers, and correlations, our understanding of complex systems can be equally informed by stories, memory, and tradition. Joint fact-finding seeks to bring diverse perspectives together to illuminate our understanding(s) of a problem or problems (Susskind, Field & Smith, 2016).

A fundamental question is: how do you integrate indigenous and traditional ways of knowing with scientific, technical, or Western ways of knowing. This is a tricky problem. One example we recently worked on is with the United States Department of Interior and numerous tribes whose cultural resources have been harmed in some fashion by contamination from Superfund sites (i.e., sites in the United States that are contaminated by hazardous waste). The Department wants to come up with ways of assessing cultural resource loss at Superfund sites in order to obtain natural resource damages from the polluting parties. The polluting parties and often the courts say—quantify it: name it, number it, explain it, and measure it. What tribes may very well say is that they will not reveal to outside parties the location, exact nature, or specificity of their culture resource (say, a certain forest with particular medicinal herbs or a unique and special fishing spot)—I can't name it for you exactly—and it is not simply the number of medicinal plants or salmon lost over the last twenty years. For example, a tribe may say, "Salmon are the lifeblood of our ways, our tradition, our culture, our spirits, our youth, our teaching. So tell me, how do you value the fact my child will never catch a salmon on the end of a hook?" Yet, the courts require that parties come up with a dollar number: what is the resource loss so that we can ascribe blame and then we can allocate costs and someone pays and we are done. Justice is done we move on. Western thinking requires us to categorise, to box, to file away, to calculate and measure, to break things apart and fractionate them. And this is often completely antithetical to the way that an indigenous culture where people view things as connected, systemic, part of a greater whole. Furthermore, the very things that Western science treats as objects—a tree, a river, a mountain—may be seen by native cultures as subjects. In the Maliseet language, for instance, trees and water are treated as subjects, like humans, capable of action and experience.

So, back to joint fact-finding, sustainability, and evaluation. We have to find ways to think systematically, holistically, not as broken apart, but connected. Let me finish with a brief case building on the Maliseet and their interest in restoring the Wolastoq, or, in Western parlance, the St John River.² The Maliseet are a Nation of Native Americans and First Nations, indigenous peoples with a common language and customs whose traditional territory encompassed what is now New Brunswick, Quebec, and Maine. The Wolastoq is a magnificent river that flows from the hinterlands of Maine up into New Brunswick, and then meanders as the border between the United States and Canada until it reaches St John Bay. Through the initiative of native leaders, Maliseet from both sides of the border have invited federal agencies from both countries to engage in how to think about, interact with, work together to, restore this river so that salmon might once again run from the sea to the streams and creeks of the upper watershed. There are numerous threats to the river: development, agricultural use of fertiliser and pesticides, mining and manufacturing, and the damming of the river in many places to generate recreation and energy. How might we evaluate the success of the effort by federal agencies and Maliseet to collaborate together? There's really multiple goals.

The first and most important goal and obviously a thrust of this current government in Canada is reconciliation. There are fundamental questions of justice and relationships and power, and that's a big goal for this process. Oftentimes myself as a westerner and mediator get trapped in a particular way of instrumental thinking—what do we need to do next? What are the data we need to collect and the models we need to run? How can we show concrete progress through projects, timelines, and milestones? And my colleague who is Maliseet has to constantly remind me: “That’s all well and good but there’s

2 More about the work of restoration and the Maliseet people can be found at: <https://maliseet-nationconservation.ca/>

actually a bigger goal here and we've got to tend to the relationships. We have to tend to the reconciliation and things must fall underneath that broad goal." In process, this means stepping back from technical presentations, discussions about assessment tools and genetic studies, and saying, what are we trying to do here? Where does actual decision-making power rest? Are the federal agencies willing to alter their agenda to meet First Nations' agenda meaningfully and substantively or, to merely seek to fulfil their own internal, Western, bureaucratic metrics? Will federal agencies be willing to challenge traditional power relationships? Secondly, this is a question of shared governance which is a political and administrative question. How do we do it and how do we evaluate that? And lastly, there are a number of items around measuring monitoring and restoring natural resources that we can more easily in our Western ways of knowing evaluate—what is the water quality? How many salmon have returned? What can be much harder to evaluate is both the cultural loss and gain of what the parties do together on that river since salmon are an essential species not only for food but for religion, for spiritual and cultural sustenance (Peterman, 2011). Even basic language and their underlying legal and political framework trips us up when the United States uses the term "government-to-government" and Canada uses the term nation-to-nation.

So what does this all mean for evaluators? The frame of sustainability expands the frame of the evaluation from the narrow remit of the intervention, which is usually a single system or narrow set of questions—did x number of salmon return to the river or were y more groups included in a decision-making process—to an expanded frame where the causes, contributions, and interactions of complex systems are included: Did the process help reconcile the parties to one another and their relationship to the cultural, spiritual, and natural river system? So moving outside narrow accountability to be able to

address both systems and incorporate effects in both coupled systems is essential. Understandably, this will be met with resistance. That's too hard to evaluate? We cannot measure that level of complexity? Measuring too much with too few tools and dollars means we'll measure nothing. All these things may be true, especially if we continue to see the evaluator as, to use a metaphor, an independent sea captain measuring latitude with a sextant independent of the ship's crew, the purpose of the journey, the context of the captain and his authority, and importantly, the actual longitude, not merely latitude of the ship. Yes, with a clear measurement and measurer we can get the latitude, but we may completely miss the story of that journey, the ship's actual destination, and the actual impact of that journey on others. Evaluators can and must measure what they can and what they have been asked to, but evaluators must also push to begin to tackle bigger, harder, more complex questions around coupled systems. Without at least beginning, even in small steps, to take on this bigger enterprise, we're likely to measure accurately the things we can even as the ship sinks beneath us.

In closing, the challenge for evaluators is to help us all develop ways of thinking and working where we can begin to evaluate systems, and their complex interactions, and relationships, and the quality of cultural and spiritual change and growth. If we are to overcome the fallacies of Western thinking and wind our way towards a notion of sustainability that allows us to connect and thrive, we need evaluation to help us think differently about projects, metrics, indicators, and what success is and might be.

References

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