3.3 Choosing Representatives

Once you figure out the level of collaboration you intend to pursue and the organizations you hope will join you, you can think about the management level that will be most appropriate to engage those organizations. The people who know what the issue is, and know what needs to happen on the ground, may not be the people who have the authority to direct an organization's resources or priorities. There are many ways to deal with such a situation, each of which might be more appropriate for different conditions.

FIELD-LEVEL

Sometimes, all you need are more arms and legs (and heads) to implement the program and extend its reach. In that case, it may be simplest to work directly with field staff who can incorporate the program's objectives into their daily work with landowners. These folks also have the best understanding of landowners and other stakeholders in the community, and their input can be crucial for getting the small tactical decisions right—such as where to hold a meeting, what community organizations to approach, or where to place your fliers.

The downside of this approach is that field staff often have little autonomy to set priorities, and they have many competing objectives and metrics to meet. Directly engaging with field staff works best when the partnership support you need is well aligned with their daily work, and/or when they can choose to participate as their time allows. It is also important to secure their supervisors' buy-in for the project and to ensure that these decision-makers understand the project's achievements and their organization's contribution to the effort. Where possible, official support via a memorandum of understanding or similar agreement can give field staff more leeway to make decisions within certain parameters.

EXECUTIVE-LEVEL

In a different case, you may need partner organizations to commit significant concrete resources, provide strategic direction for the partnership, or agree to align their organizational priorities with those of the partnership. In this instance, it may be best to engage senior or executive-level staff who can direct their organization and provide a level of credibility to the partnership. These folks will be interested in large-scale impacts and how their organization can be a leader in addressing the challenge. However, they may not fully understand the details of the issue or particular barriers that field staff may face. Moreover, senior staff are often under pressure to be working on their own organization's core mission and challenges.

When working with this cohort, focus partner meetings on broad, strategic issues and ensure meetings are informative by bringing in speakers to discuss the impacts of the issue or to report on the progress of the partnership. Once the partnership has established a general direction and the partners have committed to supporting the project, institute working groups that engage mid-level staff in the finer details of implementing the work. Keep senior-level staff involved through brief updates on progress, highlighting how their organization is contributing and how their organization's goals are being met through the partnership's efforts. Bring them back to the table when it's time to reassess strategy or priorities.

MID-LEVEL

Finally, you may be working with staff that are somewhere in the middle. These folks are likely to understand the issues on the ground, have close connections with field staff, and may have some autonomy to commit time and resources to the partnership on behalf of their organizations. However, they will need to get buy-in for the partnership up and down their chains of command. They may not be in a position to direct the structure and scope of the partnership and may need to get approval from their organizations regarding issues such as data sharing and branding. While they are likely to have influence over other organizational resources, it is important to ensure these partners have information and arguments to assist them in gaining buy-in, such as benefits and successes of the partnership. You will also need to allow ample time for the making of decisions that may require them to consult with their organizations.

Regardless of who serves as an organization's representative, consistency is key. At the outset, make sure that the individual representative and their organization are committed to their participation in your project. A simple sheet outlining basic partner expectations can help create clarity for everyone. It may include, for example, the goal of the partnership, the estimated time commitment (e.g., four meetings a year, with email communications in between, for the next two years), and a request that they let you know if they are no longer able to participate.

It can sometimes feel as if you have to "take what you can get" when seeking partners, but if you consider all of the time and effort (and sometimes money) that you will be putting into the partnership, it makes sense to be selective and require some level of commitment. It is hard to accomplish much when issues have to be re-explained at each meeting, or you get a rotating cadre of organizational representatives who don't entirely understand the purpose of the partnership or their organization's role. Of course, not everyone will be able to attend every call, but if an issue is actually important to that organization and they see value in the partnership, it is not unreasonable to ask them to attend meetings consistently.

Depending on their expertise and positions, senior, mid-level, and field staff bring different skills and resources to the coalition. When you have a choice, try to ensure that the positions of your points of contact at partner organizations are aligned with the kind of participation and contribution you seek, and be prepared to manage the coalition accordingly. Do your best to make it easy for your partners to participate by providing data and resources that will help them get the buy-in they need.