

## MORE THAN A “ONE-TRICK PONY”: EXPLORING THE CONTOURS OF A MULTI-SECTOR CONVENER

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Today’s managers must find ways to identify and sustain productive relationships within multi-sector collaborative arrangements. This paper explores empirically the activities of a convener based on tasks identified by Agranoff and McGuire (2001) and applies this framework to the case of Virginia’s Coastal Zone Management Program (VCZMP). We find that the convener displays characteristics described by Agranoff and McGuire, as well as characteristics of traditional hierarchical managers. This research suggests that both sets of skills are necessary for effective multi-sector collaborative governance.

### INTRODUCTION

The use of collaborative arrangements to accomplish public ends has captured the attention of scholars of both public administration and public policy for many years. From its rather humble roots as a means to describe policy formulation activities among a disparate set of actors, the use of collaboration models expanded to describe activities in broader areas such as health and human services, environmental planning, and governance. As more scholars adopt collaborative approaches in their quest

to understand these complex processes, the development of collaboration theory struggles to keep pace with the descriptive and explanatory demands placed upon it.

While the literature places much emphasis on collaboration, the management of collaborative arrangements involving multiple levels of government, the nonprofit, voluntary and the private sector (Brooks, 2002) to achieve public goals is less understood.<sup>1</sup> Collaborative public management refers to “a concept that describes the process of facilitating and operating in multiorganizational arrangements in order to remedy problems that cannot be solved – or solved easily – by single organizations” (McGuire, 2006, p. 33). The success of multi-sector collaboration depends on leveraging efforts of actors across sectors. Differing missions, values, and responsibilities inherent in these sectors (Babiak and Thibault, 2009; Huxham, 2003; Isett and Provan, 2005) place additional burdens on the individuals managing these arrangements; they also require the development of new frameworks by scholars to better describe and explain the behaviors present in these arrangements.

In their 2001 article, Robert Agranoff and Michael McGuire address several “metaquestions” (p. 295) related to collaborative management, including the exploration of functional processes for “network management.”<sup>2</sup> The implication of this approach is that multiorganizational arrangements can (and should be) manipulated in the same manner that

traditional hierarchical organizations are managed; indeed, the term “management” implies an authoritative relationship between the manager and the other members of the group. By the same token, Agranoff and McGuire provide a useful starting point for how to conceive of the ways in which public officials can employ collaborative arrangements to achieve public goals.

The purpose of this paper is to explore differences between traditional conceptions of public management and collaborative management. Like Agranoff and McGuire (2001), we argue that the skills necessary to “manage” collaboration are fundamentally different from traditional conceptions of public management, and we require a fundamentally different framework to explore these skills. Unlike Agranoff and McGuire, however, we begin from the premise that collaborations can be multi-sectoral, and that collaborative “management” is thus not necessarily a function (or form) of traditional public management. We suggest that, rather than thinking in terms of collaborative “managers,” we should think in terms of “conveners,” a role that encompasses elements of both traditional management and “network management.” This paper develops a framework to describe the role of the convener, based on the tasks identified by Agranoff and McGuire, and applies that framework to the case of Virginia’s Coastal Zone Management Program (VCZMP) to examine the veracity of this approach.

This research is important for several reasons. First, it addresses a gap in the literature by exploring empirically the activities of a convener in a multi-sector collaboration and offers a framework that may be applied in other situations. Second,

the role of joint action in the formulation and implementation of public policy has long been recognized as an integral part of the policy process (see, for example, O’Toole, 1991; Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973). As multi-sector collaboration becomes more commonly employed, the place for non-governmental actors in these arrangements becomes increasingly important for students and practitioners to understand (Selden, Sowa, and Sandfort, 2006). Third, as public organizations face increasing demands and scarce resources, managers must find alternative ways of addressing complex problems. Multi-sector collaboration offers a potentially useful mechanism to meet these resource needs, although the very nature of these arrangements defies the use of conventional management techniques and theories. As a new generation of public and nonprofit managers enters the workforce, they must be prepared to meet the challenges and opportunities presented by multi-sector arrangements and must be equipped to operate successfully in both traditional and non-traditional organizational environments (Crosby and Bryson, 2005; Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000; Feldman and Khademian, 2001).

### TOWARD A THEORY OF COLLABORATIVE MANAGEMENT

Collaboration theory has been a part of the vocabulary of public administration and public policy for several decades. Interactions between organizations were first acknowledged in Pressman and Wildavsky’s (1973) *Implementation*, where ignorance of organizational interdependence in complex decision chains ultimately contributed to a mismatch between policy expectations and outcomes. Implementation inevitably

requires interactions across organizational boundaries (Hjern and Porter, 1981), and multiorganizational implementation occurs when two or more organizations work together to implement policy (O'Toole, 1995). Since collective action lies at the heart of multiorganizational implementation (O'Toole, 1991), researchers often use terms such as cooperation, coordination, or collaboration to describe interactions between participants (Jennings and Ewalt, 1998; O'Toole and Montjoy, 1984). This paper focuses on the management of collaborative interactions during multiorganizational implementation.

Managing collaborative arrangements is based on a participative approach that emphasizes shared power amongst all participants as the collective group establishes goals (Crosby, 1996). Since participant membership is fluid and the environment is often more complex, collaborative arrangements are subject to more variation and uncertainty than hierarchical organizations (O'Toole and Meier, 1999). Rather than being arranged in a manner conducive to the application of traditional conceptions of legal-rational (organizational) authority, any participant within the arrangement may lead and mobilize resources in order to attain the objectives of the collective group (Crosby, 1996). In fact, interpersonal relations between group members can generate informal power that is of greater importance than formal sources of power (Keast, Mandell, Brown, and Woolcock, 2004). Collaborative management uses flexibility, shared power, and diverse perspectives to attain the goals established by the collective arrangement.

However, little attention has been paid to the

question of how to bring resources to bear across organizational boundaries when legal authority structures are lacking and the basis of membership is voluntary association. In his review of the state of collaborative public management, McGuire (2006) addresses both the structure of collaborative arrangements and the skills necessary for effective collaborative management. He opens the discussion of collaborative management by citing previous work by Agranoff and McGuire (2001). In this article, Agranoff and McGuire identify four categories of behavior for collaborative management, and identify a series of seven "big questions" of network management. A central tenet of these questions is that collaborations can be "managed." While Agranoff and McGuire correctly ask whether the tasks of a "network manager" are similar or different from those of a traditional manager, the premise of a "managed" collaboration seems to be something of an oxymoron: if collaborations are fundamentally different in structure and operation from traditional hierarchical organizational forms (Knoke and Kuklinski 1982), does it even make sense to talk about "managing" such a structure? Complicating the issue are the apparent similarities between traditional management and Agranoff and McGuire's four tasks of "network managers." If we find the same tasks present in traditional management, is collaborative management really different?

Our position is that multi-sector collaborations by their nature defy management, and that attempts to employ the term "management" leads to conceptual opaqueness and confusion. Rather than playing a directive role, leadership in multi-sector collaborative arrangements plays something more akin to a facilitative role.

Therefore, the term “convener,” as opposed to “network manager,” may describe this role better. A convener is someone who works among equal partners to create conditions conducive to successful collaboration. This convener role is described by Takahashi and Smutny (2002, p. 165) as a “collaborative entrepreneur” who recognizes an opportunity and takes action to bring partners together. This is not to suggest that the resources, influence, or level of interest is equal across all members, but rather that all participate willingly and freely in the group, and are not subject to the formal authority or orders of other members of the group.

The four tasks identified by Agranoff and McGuire (2001) include activation, framing, mobilizing, and synthesizing. These tasks provide a framework to view the role of a convener.

*Activation* involves the identification of participants and stakeholders, and identifying the specific resources or skills each player brings to the group (2001). Conveners develop conditions that facilitate collaboration (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994) and provide opportunities for participants to pledge resources (Jennings and Krane, 1994) to the collective effort. In short, activation is about setting the conditions to make collaborative efforts worthwhile and productive for all participants.

*Framing* is the process of establishing operating rules, influencing prevailing norms and values, and molding the perceptions of participants (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001) to promote collaborative spirit. While framing often takes place at the time of group formation, it can also be employed if collaborative performance diminishes. An important difference

between traditional management and the role of the convener in a multi-sector collaboration is that the convener’s role is primarily to encourage the framing of values, norms, and rules, rather than offering a top-down imposition of these elements. We suggest that the process of framing must also include an ability to scan the environment (Honig, 2006), along with a sense of timing to determine when collaborative action is appropriate and useful.

*Mobilizing* is the process through which the participants arrive at a shared agreement on goals, scope, and common objectives; it encompasses the inspiration and motivation of the group’s membership (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001) in order to secure participation and support. We suggest that mobilizing also legitimizes the convener, the participants, and the broader vision and goals of the collaborative effort. In addition to having an appreciation for the potential for mutual exchange, the convener must be recognized as having a legitimate role in facilitating trust with and between participants (Gray 1985).

Finally, *synthesizing* is the process of creating an environment conducive to cooperation and positive interactions, and minimizing or removing barriers to cooperation (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001). Such activities involve reducing complexity and uncertainty, manipulating incentives to cooperation, and engendering communication between participants. In short, synthesizing is a process through which the participants are blended together in a common purpose. Agranoff and McGuire (2001, p. 301) note that all four of these tasks are “nearly seamless in their applicability,” an observation with which we are in full agreement.



At first glance, these tasks appear to be very different from the tasks of a traditional manager. Gulick's (1937) description of the tasks of a manager, known by its acronym, POSDCORB<sup>3</sup> has dominated discussions of public management for decades. All of the tasks identified by Gulick are inherent to management in a bureaucratic structure, and all can be accomplished through the application of formal organizational authority. However, the activities of a convener and POSDCORB functions of a traditional manager are not necessarily mutually exclusive. While the activation in a bureaucracy is generally predetermined by prevailing organizational structure, framing can be accomplished through the manipulation of organizational culture. Traditional managers can employ processes to inculcate members with a certain set of values and guide behavior through formal rules. Even though mobilization in a hierarchy is determined by political authorities outside the organization, inspiring members is a common element of leadership theory. Synthesizing bureaucratic activities is apparent when performance incentives are offered or dispute resolution is used to address conflicts among members.

However, if these tasks are present in hierarchical structures, how is multi-sector collaborative management different from traditional management? We take the position that the most important difference between a traditional manager and a multi-sector collaborative convener is the relative balance of skills needed. Even a marginally enlightened bureaucratic manager is likely to show evidence of "people skills"—the ability to use means other than legal-rational authority to compel people to achieve desired results. Indeed, discussions in preceding paragraphs indicate that

traditional managers use skills that go well beyond POSDCORB. Likewise, even in a collaborative setting, one can easily imagine that someone must plan meetings, write reports and memos, and track budget expenditures. Traditional managers rely more on POSDCORB skills because of the demands of legal-rational authority and accountability in bureaucratic organizations. Multi-sector collaborative conveners rely more on the activities identified by Agranoff and McGuire (2001) because they lack the legal-rational authority to compel members to act. Moreover, the inherent need to balance differing values, goals, and missions in a collaborative arrangement requires a fundamentally different management approach than the one provided by the prevailing literature. In short, successful management in multi-sector collaboration requires managers to be something more than "one-trick ponies." This idea is explored using a case study approach.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE VCZMP

The setting for this study involves a collaborative arrangement of public, private, and nonprofit organizations working together to implement coastal resource policies on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. The Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 created opportunities for coastal states to develop programs to manage environmental resources through protection, restoration, and enhancement (United States Congress, 1972). The Virginia Coastal Zone Management (VCZM) Program was established in 1986, by executive order, to protect Virginia's coastal zone from competing demands on land use and pressures from continued growth (Kaine, 2006). The executive order explained the program's mission, specified policy goals,

identified the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) as the lead agency, and required specific state agencies to participate in program implementation.

The VCZM Program focused its resources and expertise on the Eastern Shore of Virginia beginning in 2002 (VCZMP, 2007). With the Chesapeake Bay to its west and the Atlantic Ocean to its east, the Eastern Shore is a peninsula that runs along the coast of Virginia and Maryland. The area is very rural and sparsely populated, with agriculture and tourism serving as the largest industries in the region. The primary goals of the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program were to restore coastal habitats and replenish aquatic resources along Virginia's Eastern Shore while promoting sustainable economic activities such as ecotourism and aquaculture (2007). With a rural landscape, nonexistent government protections, and a difficult economy, aquatic resources were declining dramatically due to over-harvesting, disease, and habitat loss (2007). In addition, farmers faced severe pressures to sell land to developers. The collaborative arrangement focused its efforts on purchasing land and developing sustainable industries dependent on the protection of coastal resources to prevent further habitat loss and minimize economic stress (2007).

A collection of fifteen federal agencies, Virginia state agencies, local governments, and nongovernmental organizations worked together to implement the program.<sup>4</sup> Other than the designation of Virginia's DEQ as the lead agency, the executive order did not detail how or to what extent organizations should work together. Government partnerships with nonprofit organizations included The Nature Conservancy and Eastern Shorekeeper. Partnerships with

private organizations included Cherrystone Aquafarms and Southeast Expeditions. Nonprofit organizations and private businesses, while part of the collaborative arrangement implementing the program, were not identified in the executive order.

Two types of horizontal structures were used to establish linkages among partners. The Coastal Policy Team (CPT) created a forum for state and local government representatives to develop policies, allocate resources, and prioritize funding needs through consensus.<sup>5</sup> Each member had voting rights; decisions, such as prioritizing issues for future research and funding, were based on consensus and compromise. These decisions were typically guided by a desire to provide state policymakers and citizens with the information needed to make sound policy decisions regarding land-use on the Eastern Shore.

The executive steering committee, a second type of horizontal structure, was comprised of personnel with field level expertise and responsibilities for managing projects on the Eastern Shore. Members of this committee had 20 to 30 years experience in studying ecosystems of the Eastern Shore. The use of the CPT and executive steering committee facilitated the involvement of two levels of personnel from each state agency – resource administrators and field project managers. Representatives on the CPT typically supervised project managers on the executive steering committee.

The VCZM Program Manager, a middle-level administrator in the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), convened the collaborative arrangement and provided a significant source of leadership while serving as a mechanism to encourage

interactions between organizations. In bringing organizations from various sectors together, the convener ensured specializations needed to carry out the program's objectives were represented within the group. Five other personnel employed by the DEQ assisted the program manager and comprised the VCZM Program staff.

Grant money funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) was administered by the VCZM Program staff. These funds were used to maintain ongoing programs, support a large program identified as a main focal area, or help smaller projects get started. The VCZM Program found it beneficial to fund a long-term project aligned with their main focal area which was selected every three years by the CPT based on input from all participants (OCRM, 2004; VCZMP, 2005). As Guo and Acar (2005) acknowledge, the potential for receipt of government funding was an important factor for nonprofit organizations to consider when deciding to engage in collaborative interactions (2005).

Grant contracts were used to distribute money, define the scope of a particular project, and formally identify a single organization's responsibility for meeting the requirements in the grant. A lead organization was designated for each project and became legally responsible for implementing specifications within the contract. This organization had discretion to work with other government agencies and nongovernmental partners to achieve project goals. Partnering organizations were often involved in project implementation even if these relationships were not specified in the grant. Each project was assigned a grant coordinator and a project manager from the

VCZM Program staff. The grant coordinator ensured grant money was used as intended. The project manager facilitated relationships between the program and the lead organization responsible for project implementation. Project management typically went beyond the terms specified in the grant contract.

Collaboration is often used to address problems of great complexity--implementation of the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program was no exception. Complexity within this environmental landscape was based in part on the scale of the problem, inabilities of a single organization to obtain the physical and financial resources needed to resolve the problem, the number of organizations involved, and constant changes to the landscape. A broad range of resource issues also contributed to the complexity within relationships; for example, bird habitats were best protected by tracking predatory animals, purchasing undeveloped land, and controlling invasive plant species. Promoting ecotourism, creating trails for bird watching, and using public volunteers to plant sea grasses helped citizens understand the importance of protecting undeveloped land. Relationships within the collaboration were complicated by various legal authorities, missions, goals, and operational procedures that guided individual public agencies. These differences were overcome through the efforts of the convener. The following sections identify the methods used in this research and address the convener's involvement in activities pertaining to building and sustaining the collaboration.

**METHODS**

A single case study design was used for this research and the VCZM Program was selected as the setting based on the following criteria: (1) the program was comprised of a collection of organizations which interacted frequently; (2) no organization had formal authority to direct a particular type of interaction with other organizations; and (3) a convener encouraged interaction between participants. In this study, textual data were collected through semi-structured interviews from administrators representing each of the organizations implementing the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during April and May 2008 with 34 individuals representing 15 organizations to gather information-rich detail and explore multiple views on the program’s convener. Snowball sampling was used to identify knowledgeable informants. Interviews began with members of the CPT involved with the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program. An interview protocol guided conversations; questions asked of participants are listed in Table 1 and relate to the management and operations of the collaborative arrangement. Themes aligned with Agranoff and McGuire’s four tasks for conveners emerged from the interviews as participants described the collaborative arrangement and the roles of various participants. These themes developed as part of a broader study on collaborative behavior.

1	Why do participants work with others to implement the VSHP?
2	How are relationships built between participants?
3	What administrative structure supports relationships between participants?
4	How are the roles/responsibilities for participants determined?
5	What individuals/organizations play a key role in bringing participants together?
6	What processes are used to sustain relationships between participants?
7	How do you communicate with others?
8	How are decisions made in regards to program implementation?
9	How are organizational resources reallocated to the collective arrangement?
10	How would you describe your commitment to the VSHP?
11	What incentives are provided to encourage participation?
12	How would you describe the level of trust between participants?
13	VSHP?

**Table 1 Semi Structured Interview Protocol**

Although the researcher took field notes throughout the interview process, audio recordings allowed the researcher to concentrate fully on interviewee responses and probe for clarification when needed. The researcher used audio recordings in post-interview reviews to ensure accuracy of data and recreate exact quotations and insights. Verbatim transcriptions were



developed and emailed to interviewees to provide them with an opportunity to make revisions to the document. As themes pertaining to activating, framing, mobilizing, and synthesizing the collaboration emerged, the researchers developed a coding scheme based on the operationalizations of these tasks by Agranoff and McGuire (2001). The coding scheme was used to further guide content analysis of the raw data. A qualitative methodology suited this research because it allowed for in-depth review of the roles played by the convener.

### IDENTIFYING THE ATTRIBUTES OF A CONVENER IN THE CZMP

#### Activating

In this setting, the activation of participants with an array of specialized expertise and diverse resources was needed to generate the capacity to address varied environmental issues on Virginia's Eastern Shore. An interviewee conveyed the necessity for variation among collaboration participants, "The goals of the program were pretty broad so no one agency could do it themselves. You had to have that mix of expertise and disciplines to cover the bases of all the different resources that were on the Eastern Shore."

For example, the Virginia Institute of Marine Science and the Virginia Marine Resources Commission spearheaded oyster restoration. The Department of Environmental Quality had expertise in grant and environmental management. Avian patterns and habitats were studied by the Center for Conservation Biology. The Department of Conservation and Recreation focused on controlling invasive species and

developing walking trails. The Nature Conservancy had access to volunteers and could allocate money to quickly purchase land that was for sale.<sup>6</sup> The Eastern Shorekeeper provided informal enforcement to ensure restored areas remain undisturbed. The University of Virginia had expertise in environmental facilitation. The common thread among all participants was their commitment to protecting environmental resources on the Eastern Shore. Aligned interests facilitated connections among participants of this collaboration. An interviewee suggested, "When we saw our missions cross, we worked together."

The convener of this group played an important role in developing the foundation for a productive collaboration. This foundation was built by helping participants understand why the collaboration was important and how they could benefit by being a member. Sowa (2009) researched nonprofit managers involved in 20 interagency collaborations and identified a perceived benefit for the delivery of social services and individual organizations as motivation for interaction; the convener of the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program also recognized this benefit. It was mentioned in an interview that the convener "did a good job of bringing the right people in and helping them understand that creating this regional coalition was not only possible but beneficial to everyone." Participants indicated that they worked actively to tie their organizations and research together, because they were able to accomplish more by doing so. Several interviewees described this process as "piggybacking." Like many public organizations, those involved with the VSHP had fewer resources and tighter budgets to face increasingly complex problems. An interviewee conveyed that

scarce resources brought organizations together. “We had a huge mandate and little resources to accomplish it with. So we had a vested interest to work together.” The convener showed participants how leveraging resources and money could help them achieve their goals. The need to leverage resources was described by an interviewee, “The job that needed to be done was bigger than any one agency. And things like the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program gave you a vehicle for everyone to work together . . . to get in the same car and to get to the same place with somebody else providing the fuel.”

This theme of leveraging resources was especially prevalent when interviewees discussed the magnitude, scope, and successes of what they accomplished when working together. For example, the cost of land on the Eastern Shore often required organizations to pool various funding sources in order to purchase a piece of property. Since The Nature Conservancy could allocate funding in timely manner and utilize their money in ways that public organizations could not, this nonprofit often spearheaded the land purchase of desired property for ecosystem protection and restoration. The bureaucracy within public organizations made them unable to operate at the same speed. In these situations, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service worked together to repurchase the land from The Nature Conservancy and manage it in perpetuity. All three organizations owned and managed land on the southern tip of the Eastern Shore. The importance of working together was expressed by an interviewee: “When you were faced with small pots of money, the only way to get anything done was through

partnerships and leveraging people’s efforts.”

The convener relied on skills such as persuasion and strategic problem-solving to activate collaboration among participants. In showing participants the scale and scope of what could be achieved by working together, the convener convinced them that it was a mutually beneficial relationship. As suggested in the literature (McGuire, 2006), the convener brokered relationships strategically to match problems with participants who could provide solutions. Therefore, projects needing resources were linked with participants who had the resources and were willing to share them. As a participant conveyed, “It was an opportunity to be successful in a way that was impossible otherwise. It created opportunities to work with other agencies in a way where the whole was greater than the sum of the parts.” While managers in hierarchical organizations also make staffing decisions (McGuire, 2002), their skills focus on centralized planning and commanding formal authority rather than persuasion and strategic problem-solving. Instead of centrally planned staffing decisions formulated through the chain of command, the convener of this group persuaded participants to work together voluntarily by identifying common ground.

### Framing

While participants involved in this collaboration represented different organizations with unique missions and cultures, the convener played a critical role in building consensus and developing a shared vision among participants. As the convener facilitated group discussion among participants, opportunities developed for

them to learn about one another. Through this knowledge, participants focused on maximizing common ground by uniting behind the needs of the environmental resources on the Eastern Shore. In doing so, “turf” issues were minimized. An interviewee expressed recognition of this common ground, “It’s all different roads leading to the same destination.” Another interviewee conveyed how a common goal united the organizations implementing the VSHP, “When the bottom line was the protection of the resource, and that was what you were focused on, I think it was easier to resolve these issues.”

The convener facilitated group discussion in order for participants to become more knowledgeable about other perspectives. An interviewee conveyed the importance of listening to others, “It was not enough to accurately hear what other people were saying; you actually had to understand why they were saying it, what their perspectives were, and what they really needed.” Interviewees indicated that they spent great amounts of time discussing what programs to pursue on the seaside and how to implement them. When problems arose, they also spent a lot of time resolving them. There was great emphasis placed on identifying common opportunities that involved projects deemed valuable by a majority of participants.

Through dialogue, the convener encouraged the exchange of ideas and development of creative solutions. According to an interview discussion, participants within the group used an “ecosystem mentality” when focusing on land management and habitat restoration on the Eastern Shore. In utilizing a regional approach, many participants engaged in discussion hoping to find ways

to control phragmites, an invasive plant species that disrupts the seaside’s natural landscape. Through discussion with partners, Virginia’s Division of Natural Heritage began using low-elevation flights with helicopters and global positioning systems to map the phragmites. With personnel and resources from other organizations, the collaboration was able to track the locations of this invasive plant in order to eliminate it more effectively.

Members of the group seemed comfortable with one another and knew their partners were committed to working together. It was an “ethic of collaboration” (Thomson and Perry, 2006, p. 25) that strengthened connections and supported the exchange of resources within this group. Participants believed that their partners would work in good faith to address the resource needs of the Eastern Shore. Managers in a hierarchical organization focus on executive-centered problem solving, providing clear direction, and administrative control. Instead of expecting participants to comply with orders from above, the convener negotiated common ground and generated goal alignment through shared values involving coastal resource protection.

### Mobilizing

The convener helped collaboration participants form two groups where decisions were made based on shared agreement. One horizontal structure used to govern the collaboration was the Coastal Policy Team (CPT). This governing body was comprised of administrators representing Virginia’s natural resource agencies and local governments from Virginia’s coastal zones. Programmatic decisions were made through consensus and

compromise to guide the overall direction of the group. A transparent decision-making process was embraced to guide the direction of the program; each representative had an equal vote when making decisions. This process was described by an interview participant: "Decision making was a collegial process. There were a lot of prioritizations to be made. It was an open, roundtable discussion. And we tried to come to consensus on what the priorities would be." It was common for interview participants to describe the process as a discussion among equal stakeholders. An interviewee explained the role of the CPT, "Each time you looked at a project, it was a collection of partners that had all come together. And I don't know if those partners would have necessarily worked as well together if there hadn't been a structure to bring them together."

The convener mobilized collaborative participation through the CPT and executive steering committee; connections were made at more than one organizational level--resource administrators and project managers. Operations within the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program ran smoothly because resource administrators and project managers were linked vertically within their own organizations and horizontally with counterparts in other organizations. This combination of vertical and horizontal linkages helped foster increased communications and awareness for the group. Power was dispersed among numerous people within two governance structures so no one participant had authority over the group.

Throughout the interviews, participants explained that the convener facilitated the group's evolution by initiating the program,

involving stakeholders, and helping the group build trust. Based on expertise in facilitating relationships, the convener was seen as a legitimate person to bring the group together and had high levels of credibility with participants. An interviewee explained this relationship, "The convener had a long history on the Eastern Shore so this was building upon or a reinvestment on past investments." Although sometimes outside the scope of the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program, the convener spent a great deal of time working with these same organizations. The participative approach used by the convener emphasizing shared power among participants was far from the top-down approach emphasizing command and control used to manage within hierarchical organizations. The convener relied on flexibility, shared power, and diverse perspectives to attain the goals established by the group.

### Synthesizing

Reliance on existing relationships helped the convener develop an environment conducive to cooperation. Almost 20 years ago, four of the organizations in this policy collaboration formed the Southern Tip Partnership in hopes of protecting the mid-Atlantic migration corridor. Twenty years later, the organizations and people representing these organizations continued to interact in significant ways. Discussions during interviews suggested that the group's success was attributed to this stability. "The secret of success was the continuity of the personnel over time." Another participant expressed agreement, "The partners that were in it from the beginning were largely still in it." As a result, these organizations developed a deep understanding of the area and other organizations involved. Many



participants expressed a need for their commitment to continue “in perpetuity.” Through these long-standing relationships, informal communication channels developed as personnel saw one another through the course of daily operations. An interviewee discussed this personal involvement, “It was the fact that you saw these folks all the time. The fact that it was a small landscape, very stable staff -- people were here for a long time.” As partners learned more about one another, they knew who to call when they needed help. An interviewee described daily communications among organizations implementing the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program, “There was so much routine contact here that when it came time for all the partners to come together the only hard part was figuring out a date.” Participants enhanced their understanding of other organizations and looked for opportunities to help one another. Since organizations focused on projects that addressed one piece of the larger ecosystem, a willingness to share information allowed them to become more knowledgeable in areas that addressed interrelated pieces of the ecosystem.

Through two-way communication channels that the convener helped the group to establish and sustain, field-level personnel often worked on projects because other participants pulled them in. An interviewee described these connections, “A partner recently called me and asked if we wanted to be involved in a particular project. I called the Coastal Zone Management Program and asked if they wanted to jump in on this as well.” Participants understood the missions and interests of other organizations represented in this collaboration; this understanding helped sustain relationships. “Having those long-standing relationships

really helped in terms of pulling the partners together. The partners themselves pulled in extra people when they needed to.” Partners worked together in overlapping ways on varying projects, and repetitive linkages among organizations in different venues created “spill-over effects” in terms of familiarity and trust (deLeon and Varda, 2009, p. 68).

The convener used interagency databases to support ongoing discussion by making information widely accessible to all participants. The coastal Geospatial and Educational Mapping System (GEMS) was funded by the VCZM Program and often cited by interviewees as a useful web-based tool. An interviewee explained this tool, “Information was housed in one site – the Coastal GEMS program. This helped keep the organizations aware of what was going on so we knew what the other organizations were doing.” Participants viewed land use and resource management information through this program. In some instances, the VCZM Program required organizations receiving grant funds to produce a data layer to add into Coastal GEMS. Several interviewees explained that this approach encouraged participants to support the database and increased their willingness to share information with one another.

With the complexity of this landscape and the varied tasks involved in accomplishing the goals of the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program, the convener helped participants communicate and recognize connections between their individual projects. There was a sense of reliance among participants as they worked collectively to achieve the project’s deliverables. As suggested in some literature (Bryson, Crosby, and Stone, 2006; Huxham, 2003; McNamara, 2008; Mandell,

1999), prior relationships and open communications helped partners cultivate trustworthy relationships. Instead of supporting dialogue among multiple participants, information management in a hierarchical organization is used to articulate clearly the organization's centralized objectives throughout all layers of the hierarchy (Agranoff, 2007). In this collaboration, the convener supported relationships between participants by establishing common channels that supported ongoing discussion and mutual understanding.

### Evidence of POSDCORB Activities

Although attributes of a convener were emphasized in the case study of the Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program, there is evidence that the convener also engaged in POSDCORB activities. The convener staffed the collaboration based on the specialized expertise needed to address holistically the complex environmental protection and restoration issues on the Eastern Shore. However, the convener moved beyond the traditional staffing function in the sense that participants were invited to the table rather than directed to participate. Because many of the organizations in the collaboration were public organizations, accountability for public funds allocated by the group was important. The convener did not budget funds in the traditional sense, but the convener did track the allocation and expenditure of the funds. Much like traditional managers, this convener set up meetings among participants and documented progress through routine reports. At least once a year, the convener asked all program partners to attend a meeting to discuss status updates on

outstanding projects and allocate grant money for the following year. Notices were sent out for the meetings and minutes were kept. The convener moved beyond the traditional reporting role in the sense that the focus of the meeting minutes was more about keeping all partners informed of the discussion and less about informing supervisory personnel.

### CONCLUSION

It seems inevitable that organizations will continue to work within multi-sector collaborative arrangements to achieve policy or program goals; thus managers in the public and non-profit sectors cannot be "one-trick ponies." As managers continue to work within hierarchical organizations, it is important to maintain skills that focus on centralized planning, commanding formal authority, executive-centered problem solving, providing clear direction, administrative control, and communication (Brooks, 2002). This paper does not intend to minimize the necessity of these skills as they are important tools. However, 21st century governance also requires public managers to operate in collaborative arrangements that involve participants who fall outside legal-rational authorities. The skills needed to convene multi-sector collaborative arrangements are different from the skills needed to manage hierarchical organizations (Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Bingham, Nabatchi, and O'Leary 2005; Gazley 2008; McGuire 2006). The necessity for the convener to transition from a traditional, hierarchical organization to an organic, confederation of interested participants requires a range of skills and abilities to be effective in both settings. As a manager in a traditional bureaucratic setting, the primary skill set in

play is akin to Gulick's POSDCORB (see Gazley, 2008). In a multi-sector collaborative setting, the arrangement requires a different set of skills. Both skill sets are present simultaneously, but are perceived differently depending on the setting in which they are viewed. The four tasks identified by Agranoff and McGuire (2001) for collaborative management, provide one framework for exploring empirically the role of a convener in a multi-sector collaboration. Activating, framing, mobilizing, and synthesizing are important activities for conveners to master. Understanding differences between the two skill sets may be used to enhance training, education, and practical development of public managers.

As training and education programs continue to emphasize hierarchical management (Bingham, Nabatchi, and O'Leary, 2005), skills such as persuasion, strategic problem-solving, facilitation, negotiation, two-way communication, and active listening must not be ignored. At the very least, training opportunities and educational programs should help prepare managers to develop both skill sets (2005).

In order to prepare managers for the complex problems they will face, future research should continue to bridge the gap between hierarchical management and convening collaborative arrangements. It is through continued research that the intersection of both can be strengthened.

A common theme among interviewees is that nonprofit organizations play an important role in program implementation because they operate in ways that public organizations are unable to achieve. Evidence that this collaboration operates

beyond command-and-control authority comes from the centrality of nonprofit organizations to the implementation structure. It is not a coincidence that the missions of The Nature Conservancy and Eastern Shorekeeper align holistically with the program's goals. This finding suggests that collaborative interactions not only require mission alignment among core organizations but that the presence of nonprofit organizations within this core may be essential in developing and sustaining collaborative interactions. Furthermore, resolutions to complex problems may require nonprofit organizations to work with the for-profit sector. It is through these partnerships that an organization may become more innovative (Stephenson and Chavez, 2006). In this case study, The Nature Conservancy's access to volunteers and purchase of ecologically sensitive land would have limited impacts on restoring the Eastern Shore without assistance from private industries focused on ecotourism and aquaculture. In bringing the public, private, and nonprofit sectors together to address the environmental issues on the Eastern Shore, the convener of this group was best able to achieve public goals.

While we prefer the term "convener" to "network manager," the questions raised by Agranoff and McGuire (2001) remain relevant to our understanding of collaborative activities and outcomes. It is necessary to determine the degree to which multi-sector collaborations might help minimize the less desirable aspects of traditional bureaucratic structures, without compromising either the core values of American governance or the ability to achieve collective goals. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of collaborative arrangements, and their compatibility with

both core societal values and existing governance structures, will help us to delineate better both the opportunities and limitations offered by multi-sector collaborations.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bryson, Crosby, and Stone (2006, p. 44) define multi-sector collaboration as “the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities by organizations in two or more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately.”

<sup>2</sup> Agranoff and McGuire (2001, 296) refer to networks as “multiorganizational arrangements for solving problems that cannot be achieved, or achieved easily, by single organizations.” Agranoff (2006) uses the term ‘network’ to refer to collective action. “Public management networks are, in every sense, collaborative connections like social networks, although they not only comprise representatives of disparate organizations but also go beyond analytical modes” (56). While the authors recognize that there is a well-developed network literature, the focus of this paper is placed on characteristics of a convener within a variety of interorganizational entities rather than networks specifically. According to Agranoff (2006, 57), networks “are not the be-all and end-all of collaborative management. They share a place – in many cases, a small place – alongside literally thousands of interagency agreements, grants, contracts, and even informal contacts that involve issues such as seeking information or some form of program adjustment.”

<sup>3</sup> Gulick (1937) defines these activities as Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing, Coordinating, Reporting, and Budgeting. Responsibility for these functions effectively defined a person as a manager.

<sup>4</sup> The following organizations formed a collaborative multi-sector network to implement the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program: College of William & Mary Institute of Marine Science, College of William & Mary Center for Conservation Biology, University of Virginia, The Nature Conservancy, Eastern Shorekeeper, Southeast Expeditions, Cherrystone Aquafarms, Accomack County, Northampton County, Accomack-Northampton Planning District, Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, Virginia Marine Resources Commission, Virginia Department of Conservation & Recreation, Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

<sup>5</sup> The following state agencies were represented on the Coastal Policy Team and were involved with implementing the Virginia Seaside Heritage Program: Environmental Quality, Conservation and Recreation, and Game and Inland Fisheries. State agency representatives were resource administrators or managers selected to participate by the head of their agency. In addition, local government



representatives for the Accomack Northampton coastal area were represented on the team.

<sup>6</sup> Research by Stephenson and Chaves (2006) acknowledges that The Nature Conservancy faced public and political fallout as a result of a series of *Washington Post* articles highlighting a lack of perceived accountability and transparency regarding real estate transactions. It is important to note that the newspaper articles focused on such transactions that involved the nonprofit selling ecologically sensitive land to private citizens, who had a professional connection to the organization, for a personal gain. In this research, the purchase and management of land only occurred between The Nature Conservancy and personnel representing federal/state government agencies in a professional capacity.

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