



# What I Wish I Had Known About Collaboration Earlier in My Career

## Panel insights from the 2024 Collaboration Symposium

Ripples Across Wyoming | April 19, 2024 | Jackson, Wyoming

- Mary Margaret Golten (Founder, Mediator, CDR Associates)
- John Ehrmann (Cofounder, Senior Fellow, Meridian Institute)
- Moderator - Steve Smutko (Associate Dean, Spicer Chair of Collaborative Practice, Haub School)

The Ruckelshaus Institute's 2024 Collaboration Symposium explored the many shades and shapes that collaboration takes in the real world. More than 60 participants learned from each other's successes and failures, in conversation and workshops. A keynote address from former Bears Ears Intertribal Coalition Co-chair Regina Lopez-Whiteskunk focused on collaborative stewardship with tribes, as it played out in the creation and now management of Bears Ears National Monument.

The symposium also reflected on more than three decades of collaborative work by the Ruckelshaus Institute and other leading organizations in the field. Mary Margaret Golten, founder of CDR Associates, and John Ehrmann, cofounder and senior fellow at the Meridian Institute, along with our own Steve Smutko, reflected on their careers in collaborative practice and shared insights for both newcomers and veterans in the field.



## Addressing Complexity

Smutko kicked off the discussion by recounting his early experiences with the "alternative consequences" model, a structured method for community engagement that Smutko had learned early in his career.

The process typically unfolded as follows: Technical experts (like engineers and environmental scientists) would conduct analysis to identify the source of a problem. Based on this analysis, a set of alternative solutions would be developed. For each alternative, the consequences (economic, social, environmental, etc.) would be identified and analyzed. These alternatives and their consequences would then be presented to the community, who would be expected to choose a single alternative.

Smutko spoke of a time when he prepared a set of alternatives that he presented to the community, expecting them to simply choose one. However, the outcome was far from what he anticipated. The community's response was deeply divided: half the group favored one alternative; the other half strongly opposed it. When the chair of the committee, seeing they had enough votes, called for a decision on the favored alternative, the opposing group walked out, threatening to fight the decision.

This experience was a pivotal moment for Smutko. He realized that the alternative consequences model, despite its apparent logic and structure, was ineffective in addressing complex community issues. It failed to account for the diverse perspectives, values, and interests within the community, and didn't provide a framework for building consensus or resolving conflicts.

This realization prompted Smutko to seek out new approaches. He turned to environmental dispute resolution literature and pursued training in mediation and public dispute resolution. This shift in approach marked the beginning of his journey towards more collaborative and inclusive methods of community engagement and problem-solving.

## Empowering the Vulnerable

Golten emphasized one of her most crucial lessons: the importance of structuring processes to empower the most vulnerable participants. She shared stories from her work in Denver and Africa, illustrating how language barriers, cultural differences, and power imbalances can significantly impact collaborative efforts. Her experiences underscored the need for facilitators to be acutely aware of these dynamics and to actively work towards creating an inclusive environment.

She also stressed the importance of thorough assessment before beginning any collaborative process. She views the assessment phase as "1000 different little negotiation meetings." Time spent interviewing stakeholders and mapping out complex relationships and conflicts is crucial to the success of a formal process.

## Context and Messiness

John Ehrmann spoke about three key elements of effective collaboration: the issue at hand, the external political context, and the group process (including interpersonal dynamics). He also highlighted the need to embrace diverse problem-solving approaches, moving beyond traditional Western methods to incorporate other cultural perspectives.

Ehrmann also spoke about the value of "messiness" in collaborative processes, cautioning against over-control and encouraging facilitators to tolerate some uncertainty and unexpected directions in discussions. He paid tribute to Pat O'Toole, a rancher who exemplified the transformative potential of collaborative processes, as he evolved from a place of skepticism to become a bridge-builder between diverse stakeholders in agricultural policy discussions. The

lessons learned in collaborative settings can have far-reaching impacts on participants' broader work and lives.

## Tips for Effective Collaboration

The panelists offered the following tips for collaborators:

- 1. Implementation Begins at the Beginning:** Ehrmann stressed the importance of considering implementation from the outset of any collaborative process. This involves identifying key stakeholders, audiences, and potential roadblocks early on. Smutko said he learned to better communicate complex processes to participants, making them more accessible and less intimidating.
- 2. Build Trust Through Action:** Ehrmann noted that trust isn't built through mere declarations but through shared experiences and mutual risk-taking. Creating opportunities for these interactions is crucial for successful collaboration.
- 3. Embrace Diverse Problem-Solving Approaches:** The panel highlighted the importance of being open to different cultural approaches to addressing issues.
- 4. The Power of "Aikido" in Facilitation:** Golten introduced the concept of "Aikido" in facilitation – the art of redirecting energy rather than pushing back against resistance. This approach can be particularly effective in defusing tension and moving conversations forward. She emphasized the importance of not working harder than the clients themselves.
- 5. The Value of Pre-Work:** The importance of thorough assessments and preliminary negotiations before formal collaborative processes begin was emphasized. These "1000 little mediations" can set the stage for more successful outcomes.
- 6. Represent the Process, Not Parties:** Golten shared a significant moment in the history of mediation practice. In 1978, when trying to obtain nonprofit status, their organization was challenged by the Bar Association's unauthorized practice of law committee. They successfully argued that mediators represent the process itself, not individual parties, distinguishing their role from that of lawyers. Thus, the principle of representing the process and maintaining the trust of all parties became fundamental to their approach.
- 7. Release Expectations:** All the panelists emphasized the importance of "letting go" of control and accepting that outcomes may not always align with initial expectations. The panel recognized that even when full agreement isn't reached, the process itself often leads to valuable understanding and lays groundwork for future engagement.