

Communication Workshops through PRAP and Training Assistance

Final Report

Jan Voit

December 31, 2014

Project Sponsor:

Heron Lake Watershed District

Contributing Sponsors:

Bob McNaney, PadillaCRT

Grant Project Summary

Project title: Communication Workshops through PRAP and Training Assistance
Organization (Grantee): Heron Lake Watershed District
Project start date: 6/30/2014 Project end date: 12/31/14 Report submittal date: 12/31/2014
Grantee contact name: Jan Voit Title: District Administrator
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Grant Funding

Final grant amount: \$2,250.00 Final total project costs: \$6,459.65
Matching funds: Final cash: \$2,250.00 Final in-kind: \$1,959.65 Final Loan: \$0.00
Contract number: 441502, PRAP BWSR project manager: Don Buckhout

Executive Summary of Project

Over the course of 2013 and 2014, it had become apparent to board members, staff, advisory committee members, and agency personnel that the board of managers and staff of the Heron Lake Watershed District (HLWD) had communication difficulties. After the February 2014 board meetings, contact was made with Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) staff for assistance. BWSR staff provided information regarding the Performance Review and Assistance Program (PRAP) grant program.

After reviewing the application, Mike McCarvel, HLWD President gave permission for Jan Voit, District Administrator to contact a consultant and draft a grant application. Mike McCarvel explained the proposed format for the communication sessions at the May meeting. A motion was passed to approve submitting the PRAP Grant application.

Due to scheduling conflicts, the workshops were not held until December. Day one was comprised of a group session, followed by individual meetings with the consultant. Day two included a group session. On day one, managers and staff agreed to four action steps. On day two, commitments were made for future interaction.

Goals

To improve internal communication among the managers and staff of the HLWD to create a better environment for the effective conduct of HLWD business.

Results that count

1st Result: Successfully completed Day 1 group session and one-hour individual sessions with consultant that resulted in agreed to action steps

2nd Result: Productively identified commitments for future interaction during Day 2 session

Acronyms

- HLWD – Heron Lake Watershed District
 - BWSR – Board of Water and Soil Resources
 - PRAP – Performance Review and Assistance Program
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Scope of Work

1. Grant Agreement Amendment

1.1. Grant Agreement Amendment #1: October 29, 2014

The HLWD Administrator contact Don Buckhout, BWSR, regarding the end date for the grant agreement. An extension was requested due to scheduling conflicts with board members and the consultant, causing delays in the communication workshops.

- The expiration date for the grant agreement was amended from October 31, 2014 to March 31, 2015, or until all obligations have been satisfactorily fulfilled, whichever comes first.

2. Activities

Task 1: Secure Consultant Services

During 2013 and 2014, it had become apparent to board members, staff, advisory committee members, and agency personnel that the board of managers and staff had communication difficulties. After the February board meetings, contact was made with Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) staff for assistance.

BWSR staff provided information regarding the Performance Review and Assistance Program (PRAP) grant program. After reviewing the application, Mike McCarvel, Heron Lake Watershed District (HLWD) President gave permission to contact a consultant and draft a grant application.

On February 28, 2014, Jan Voit contacted Bob McNaney, Padilla CRT, about the possibility of conducting communication sessions with HLWD managers and staff. She had met Bob at the Minnesota Association of Watershed Districts Annual Meeting in December of 2013. He had given a workshop entitled *Effective Communications for Watershed Districts*. Bob agreed to conduct workshops. A grant application was drafted and sent to him for review.

Mike McCarvel explained the proposed format for the communication sessions at the May meeting. A motion was made and seconded to approve submitting the PRAP Grant application. Discussion was held about the cost, meeting format, communication problems, and moving forward. Motion was approved on a three to two vote.

The PRAP grant application called for the following:

- Contract services of Bob McNaney, PadillaCRT to conduct three sessions to improve internal communications to create a better environment for internal and external customers. Sessions would entail an overview of “Difficult Conversations and Their Role in Building Relationships”, Seven Critical Steps to Conflict Resolution, one-on-one sessions with the consultant, group discussion, and conflict resolution scenarios.
- Deliverables include a summary of the activities and lessons learned.

- Expected outcome will be to identify needs to improve internal communication. Secondary will be creating a better working environment and relationship between board and staff in order to better carry-out the mission of the Heron Lake Watershed District.
- Activity is expected to begin sometime in June 2014 and be completed by July 2014.

The grant application was submitted to BWSR on May 21, 2014. The grant was approved by John Jaschke, BWSR Director, on May 29, 2014. Bob McNaney was contacted after the award notification was received. The dates for the Communication Workshops were set for June 26 and June 27, 2014.

The HLWD was unaware that this grant award was through the Clean Water Fund. Because of this the workshops had to be postponed until the board of managers could take the necessary action for approval of the grant agreement and authority for the District Administrator to enter into the grant agreement.

Mike McCarvel explained the need for additional board approvals for the PRAP grant at the June meeting. A motion was made and seconded to enter into the PRAP grant agreement and authorize the District Administrator to sign the document. Discussion was held regarding concerns with the process and the need to move forward positively as a group. The motion passed on a three to two vote.

The Communication Workshops were rescheduled for July 2014. Scheduling conflicts for managers prohibited the workshops from occurring.

The Communication Workshops were rescheduled for August 26 and 27, 2014. The consultant inadvertently wrote them in his schedule for September 26 and 27, 2014. Because he didn't want to have the workshops take place during harvest, Mike McCarvel, HLWD President set the dates for September 11 and 12, 2014. The two managers from Jackson County said that they were unable to attend on those dates. So the workshops were postponed.

At the September 2014 HLWD meeting, the workshops were discussed. Mike McCarvel explained the intent of the communication workshops – bringing in a consultant to assist the board and staff with communication problems in a process meant to develop a way to relate to each other in a negotiable way. Discussion was held regarding the open meeting law. Mike Tow, HLWD legal counsel, explained that if the workshops are open or closed depends totally upon what the training involves. He did not have enough information to make that determination. Individual sessions would not fall under the open meeting law. Courts are very conservative on this issue and want entities to err on the side of being open rather than closed.

The board chose December 16 and December 17, with the board meeting to follow the workshop on December 17. Jan Voit was asked to contact the consultant and seek further

information regarding the agenda and information to be presented. The information gathered would be provided to the managers and legal counsel.

At the October meeting Jan Voit explained that the original deadline for the PRAP grant was October 31, 2014. Due to scheduling conflicts, a time extension was requested. The new end date would be March 31, 2015. A motion to approve the PRAP grant agreement amendment extending the term of the agreement to March 31, 2015 and to authorize the District Administrator to sign the grant agreement amendment on behalf of the board of managers passed unanimously.

In October 2014, a detailed agenda was drafted and sent to Bob McNaney for review and comment. Once his revisions were made, the document was sent to Mike Tow for a legal opinion. The agenda can be found in the appendix.

Mike Tow sent the following legal opinion. Bob and Mike were asked to speak directly with each other regarding how to proceed with the workshops.

I have reviewed the draft agenda relative to the communication workshop and would advise the board of managers that the individual sessions will not constitute an open meeting, even under the serialized meeting provisions of the open meeting law, in light of the fact that these sessions will not focus on any specific watershed issues or business. However, as to the group sessions, I would urge applying a conservative approach and open these sessions to the public as a public meeting because a quorum of the managers will be present, despite the trainer's statement that the training will not involve any specific watershed issues or business. Simply put, the trainer cannot predict whether a manager at the group session will bring up a question or issue which could impact a manager's vote on watershed issues or business—simply put, no one can control what might be discussed at the training by one or more of the managers to eliminate the risk of triggering the open meeting law. Hence, my recommendation would be to provide notice of these group sessions and open them to the public.

Roger Hartman brought up the Communication Workshops at the November meeting. Discussion was held regarding the agenda for the event, costs, and that the workshops will provide tools for improved communication. Discussion was also held regarding differing opinions, voicing concerns, legal issues, and managers' difficulty in dealing with each other. Mike McCarvel stated that the workshops have been approved and will be held as scheduled.

Task 2: Conflict Overview Group Session and Individual Sessions

On December 16, 2014, the first group session and the individual meetings were held. Bob McNaney introduced himself and described his firm. In his position with the business, he oversees crisis and critical issues. The session began with an ice breaker. Each attendee was asked to give an introduction, explain what makes a good day or a bad day, and name a favorite book and movie.

Bob gave a PowerPoint presentation entitled “Difficult Conversations and Their Role in Building Relationships”. The presentation can be found in the appendix. Discussion was held regarding the HLWD’s reputation and personal reputations. He explained the strategic conversation sequence and described a difficult conversation. While conflict is normal, the reaction and how it is handled have a big impact on board and staff function.

Recognizing the conflict is difficult. The majority of the participants agreed that mistrust is the biggest issue faced. The methods for addressing difficult conversations were identified: prepare, understanding, agreement on success, obtain shared commitment, agree on actions and milestones, confirm and celebrate resolution, and check in.

- Conflict is often the difference between two stories
- We often assume negative intent and negative character
- Move from assigning blame to mapping out contributions
- Acknowledge and express feelings
- Recognize the effect of conflict on “identity”
- Always have a conflict resolution strategy in mind
- Difficult conversations will move your business forward
- Assuming “ill intent” will almost never lead to satisfactory resolution
- Conflict does not always require a winner and a loser
- When conflicts aren’t getting resolved, it’s usually because a step has been skipped
- Come into difficult conversations with an open and prepared mind

Lack of communication creates distance and distance creates mistrust. That is where the board and staff are now. Individual sessions were held throughout the remainder of the day.

An explanation of the December 17, 2014 follow-up session was given. Bob will give a summary of the findings from today’s group session. Managers and staff will work together to determine action steps to move forward.

Task 3: Group Discussion and Identification of Conflict Resolution Approaches

Bob McNaney explained how the session would be conducted – review group and individual sessions, provide observations, and determine next steps.

He described the December 16 workshop as interesting, helpful, and enlightening. The morning session was very chilly. In the afternoon sessions, there was open and honest communication. The consultant’s summary can be found in the appendix.

Today’s session was set up in the Community Center’s large hall, rather than being held in the Heron Lake Watershed District (HLWD) office. He had asked everyone if they would be willing to try a different layout. All of the managers and staff were open to the new arrangement.

He wanted everyone to know that managers and staff have been physically ill by the thought of coming to meetings and after meetings. While each individual felt that way,

no one was aware that everyone had the same feelings. It is good for all of us to know that we are not alone in feeling this way. But, that is something that needs to change.

Bob explained that Dale Bartosh had informed him yesterday that he had a significant conflict for today and would be unable to attend. Dale was concerned because he did not have a chance to tell the board members. He did not want anyone to think that he was gone because he did not want to be here or was upset about what had happened yesterday. Dale took the time to speak directly with Jan Voit and explain his intentions. That was a positive, breakthrough moment.

The managers and staff were asked to enumerate a take-away from the group session.

- There are a number of little things that could be done to move us closer together and lessen the distrust factor. Part of that is communicating more with each other.
- Communication is a big item. It needs to be improved. That would take care of a lot of the things that need to be addressed.
- There are different kinds of communication. One can be direct or more open about it.
- Each of us needs to be aware of others as human beings – people we should be getting to know.
- In the current environment, it is scary to attend meetings. Staff has a fear of being open and honest with managers.
- Staff should not have to be afraid of harsh consequences for bringing something to the board's attention.
- It is important to remember why we are here – for the good of the watershed district and accomplishing projects. There should not be issues of you against me.
- All of us need to get past the “we-they” issue and make everything about “us”.
- The public cannot be satisfied with HLWD work when we do not get along.
- We are focusing on the conflict rather than the work that needs to be done.

Bob pointed out that there are a lot of old battles being fought and a lot of ghosts. The things that happened a long time ago need to be put aside. The good that happens is being overlooked.

It is important to talk to each other to get the other person's point of view and see how they are thinking. That means talking to each other before sitting down at a meeting. Everyone expressed a willingness to do that.

Discussion was held regarding being afraid of the past and HLWD “ghosts”. Considering some of those, it is amazing the quantity and quality of work that is done. We have won in spite of ourselves.

Bob made clear the necessity of talking through some things that have happened in the past. There is a need to work through those and leave them in the past. He asked everyone if they would be willing to do that, in some cases with a third party present. Everyone said that they would be willing.

Mistrust is a significant problem. Before yesterday's session, no one had said out loud that there was mistrust. Being able to say that is a huge point. It is hitting bottom. No one wants to have confrontation because of the fear of making things worse. Since we have already hit bottom, we can only go up from here. We can fix this. Realizing that is an important thing.

Intentions and motivation are a big deal. Why? Because we wonder about or assume what other people's intentions are. That assumption is probably wrong because we did not take the time to really understand what the other person is thinking. We all need to be more open minded and listen to other thoughts. Right now we are all assuming the worst. There is a lot of energy being spent focusing on what is wrong. Nothing can be fixed if intentions are not understood. Open communication would dispel the problems that we are facing.

It was mentioned that the ice breaker was a good thing. That was done so we could talk to one another first, instead of starting the session with the most serious issue. Communication has to come in steps. Ask the other person to help you understand, then reply. All of us are willing to do that.

Bob asked how, as parents, we handle a child who has something that is bothering him, but he does not convey his feelings. The steps collectively described talking about something else first to see if there is a willingness to open up, asking in small steps, do not push too hard, listen, let them know you are there, and express trust. He called this "The Roger Model" and asked that this be the way managers and staff approach each other.

Celebrating small victories is important. There is a need to celebrate the small things so the big things can happen. The room set up – the willingness to try something new – is a small victory.

Doing the work of the HLWD for the people and the watershed is why we are here. Each of us has said that we want what is best for the watershed district. Could "respect the earth, respect the water, respect each other" be our motto? Each of us needs to express our opinions in a respectful way, take one step forward, and see how it works. Small steps will be key. It was suggested that the motto should be respect each other first. Respecting the earth and water will then come easily.

The following action steps were agreed upon during the group and individual sessions on December 16:

- Ask more open ended questions
- Move the meeting location and structure
- Talk to one another before the meeting
- Add discussion items to the agenda

Having the opportunity for more discussion before action is taken would reduce conflict. It would provide a platform for questions and answers and allow more time for decision making. This will work for many items, but grant application deadlines may preclude this

method. Going forward, it will be important for board and staff to have a better understanding of each other's roles.

Commitments:

- Check in to determine progress made, identify little victories, and determine considerations for improvement by April 1, 2015
- Make an attempt to get to know the board and staff members in a more personal way
- Show up at each meeting with a different attitude
- Forget about the past, open the book to a new page and start over, forget the negative, and remember the good
- Obtain a better understanding of staff responsibilities
- Hold individual meetings
- Better communication from staff about tasks undertaken
- Board member communication with staff between and before meetings

The consultant's summary can be found in the appendix.

Grant Results

7. Measurements

Task 1: Secure Consultant Services

- Contract services of Bob McNaney, PadillaCRT were obtained to conduct three sessions to improve internal communications to create a better environment for internal and external customers.

Task 2: Conflict Overview Group Session and Individual Sessions

- Group and individual sessions were held with managers and staff on December 16, 2014.

Task 3: Group Discussion and Identification of Conflict Resolution Approaches

- Group session was held and commitments for future interaction were identified on December 17, 2014.

8. Products

Below is a list of the products created.

8.1. Appendix 1

- Agenda
- PowerPoint Presentation
- Consultant Summary of December 16 sessions
- Consultant Summary of December 17 session

9. Long-term Results

Managers began the process of fulfilling the agreed upon action steps at the December monthly meeting. The meeting setup was changed. This new format will be maintained. Questions were asked and discussion was held in a professional, courteous manner.

It will be necessary for managers and staff to make a concerted effort to fulfill the commitments identified. In January 2015, a discussion item section will be added to the agenda. It will be essential for managers and staff to spend time reviewing roles and responsibilities to lessen the possibility of conflict in the days and months ahead.

The following commitments will be reviewed at the end of each meeting.

- Check in to determine progress made, identify little victories, and determine considerations for improvement by April 1, 2015
- Make an attempt to get to know the board and staff members in a more personal way
- Show up at each meeting with a different attitude
- Forget about the past, open the book to a new page and start over, forget the negative, and remember the good
- Obtain a better understanding of staff responsibilities
- Hold individual meetings

- Better communication from staff about tasks undertaken
- Board member communication with staff between and before meetings

As progress is made, a summary will be submitted to Bob McNaney and BWSR.

10. Final Expenditures

Tables 1 and 2 contains a summary of the cash and inkind expenditures that were made.

Table 1. Final Cash Expenditures

PRAP Communication Workshops				
Check Number	Date	To	Description	Total
8298	7/15/2014	PadillaCRT	Create PowerPoint presentation	\$395.00
8390	10/21/2014	PadillaCRT	Reschedule communication workshops	\$206.25
	12/31/2014	PadillaCRT	Prepare, attend workshops, travel, lodging, and summary preparation	\$3,898.75
		Total		\$4,500.00

Table 2. Final Inkind Expenditures

PRAP Communication Workshops						
Name	Date	Description	Hours	Rate	Other	Total
J. Voit	8/14/2014	Communication Workshop agenda, correspondence	0.25	\$32.51		\$8.13
J. Voit	8/21/2014	Called Bob McNaney	0.25	\$32.51		\$8.13
J. Voit	8/22/2014	Call from Bob McNaney	0.5	\$32.51		\$16.26
J. Voit	8/25/2014	Mike McCarvel, agenda, Bob McNaney	0.25	\$32.51		\$8.13
J. Voit	9/8/2014	Call from Bob McNaney- communication workshops	0.25	\$32.51		\$8.13
J. Voit	9/9/2014	Bob McNaney - alternate dates, more info	0.25	\$32.51		\$8.13
J. Voit	9/29/2014	Bob McNaney - more info	0.25	\$32.51		\$8.13
J. Voit	10/6/2014	Mike Tow - Communication Workshops	0.25	\$32.51		\$8.13
J. Voit	10/22/2014	PRAP grant agreement amendment to BWSR	0.25	\$32.51		\$8.13
HLWD	11/24/2014	Tow Law Firm - legal opinion regarding open meeting law			\$125.00	\$125.00
J. Voit	11/26/2014	updated District Policies Handbook, Personnel Policy	0.75	\$32.51		\$24.38
J. Voit	12/11/2014	PRAP report	1.25	\$32.51		\$40.64
J. Voit	12/11/2014	Bob McNaney - communication workshops	0.5	\$32.51		\$16.26
J. Voit	12/16/2014	prepared for meeting, communication workshop	6.75	\$32.51		\$219.44
J. Voit	12/16/2014	minutes	0.25	\$32.51		\$8.13
HLWD	12/16/2014	Board per diem and travel			\$441.64	\$441.64
C. Sereg	12/16/2014	communication workshop	3	\$19.99		\$59.97
A. Schultz	12/16/2014	communication workshop	3	\$19.99		\$59.97
J. Voit	12/17/2014	communication workshop	2.5	\$32.51		\$81.28
J. Voit	12/17/2014	minutes, minutes outline	0.75	\$32.51		\$24.38
J. Voit	12/17/2014	minutes	2	\$32.51		\$65.02
C. Sereg	12/17/2014	communication workshop	2.5	\$19.99		\$49.98
A. Schultz	12/17/2014	communication workshop	2.5	\$19.99		\$49.98
HLWD	12/17/2014	Board per diem and travel			\$441.64	\$441.64
J. Voit	12/18/2014	reviewed minutes	0.25	\$32.51		\$8.13
J. Voit	12/22/2014	PRAP Final Report	2.5	\$32.51		\$81.28
J. Voit	12/23/2014	PRAP Final Report	1.25	\$32.51		\$40.64
J. Voit	12/30/2014	PRAP Final Report	1.25	\$32.51		\$40.64
					Total	\$1,959.65