The First Steps in Creating and Managing a Functional and Efficient EPA Project XL Team

Suggestions for a Valuable Team Kick-Off Meeting

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Implementing and testing innovative experiments that achieve superior environmental performance requires committed, creative project sponsors, informed stakeholders and supportive and engaged state and local governments. Contributing to success in these XL projects are carefully formed and well managed EPA teams. Made up of the appropriate regional and headquarters staff, the EPA team is the glue that holds the project together. While a well formed, well managed team does not ensure success of a project, a poorly formed, poorly managed team assuredly is a major cause of problems and delay. A carefully constructed team kick-off meeting can be a valuable tool in getting teams off to the right start. By the end of the kick-off session, members of a Project XL team should:

- have begun to delineate possible valuable aspects of the project that the team wants to work to capture; have begun to formulate strategic questions for furthering development of the project
- fully understand roles and responsibilities of the members of the team;
- have developed agreements as to how the team will communicate, work together and make decisions;
- have learned and practiced ways to prevent and handle conflicts arising during the course of the project; and
- have made agreements about how the EPA group will "speak with one voice" to project sponsors, and involve affected communities and stakeholders in their deliberations and decision-making.

This brief document is meant to complement the *Manual for EPA XL Project Teams*, where a broader discussion of suggested roles and responsibilities for Program Offices and purposes of the training can be found.

Step 1: Forming Your XL Team

It is important for any team to have all the necessary representation from the appropriate EPA offices on each XL team. A standard XL team which has proven to be effective includes, at a minimum, representatives from the following EPA Offices: Office of Reinvention, appropriate Program Office(s), Office of General Counsel, Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance and Regional Office staff. Inviting individuals from these offices is a good start. Before the first team meeting, invitees should be asked whether there are any other entities in the Agency that have an interest or stake in the project at hand, or who may be opposed to or skeptical about the project for some reason. While it may seem counterintuitive to invite individuals or offices to join your team that may be skeptical about a project, including them can be critical to your success, especially if they have the ability to stop the project down the line. Including potential detractors may result in more up front work bringing them up to speed on the project and working to include solutions to their concerns, but it prevents delays in the long run and minimizes "late hits" and surprises down the line.

Step 2: Determine the Most Important Goals for Your Meeting

Recognize that teams are different. Some teams may be composed of people who have worked together before on XL projects. Some people may not even know each other. Some members of a team may be familiar with the suggested XL milestones and processes and others may have an expectation that "anything goes" since Project XL is all about innovation. Some may have already talked extensively off line about the project and know a lot about the project sponsor, while others may have only the written proposal to go on. Information that you should use to determine your goals for the meeting could include:

- Do the participants understand the criteria and processes of Project XL?
- How familiar are the participants with the proposal and the project?
- Has the group worked together before? If so, do the same working principles and decision-making protocols apply?

Solicit from your team members ahead of time what they expect to get out of the meeting and work their suggestions, if possible, into the agenda. This will ensure team members that their needs are being met from the beginning and increase engagement in the process from the start. Many times people will not want to spend time talking about process at all, but delve immediately into complicated technical discussions.

Step 3: Designing Your Agenda

Use the answers to the above questions, the time allotted for the meeting, and the attached Sample Agenda to design your agenda. For a new group that needs to spend time reviewing XL processes, developing expectations, decision-making protocols and ground rules, or for a project that has technical questions that need to be worked through in order to move forward, a recommended minimum of two days is suggested. A well designed kick-off meeting is not only useful for setting a schedule, but can also be used to work through important questions regarding superior environmental performance and developing a preliminary list of additional information required by EPA or the project sponsor. The following components should be considered in every kick-off meeting, but the meeting content should be tailored to the needs of the group:

- Review of Project XL Process and Principles
- Review or Explanation of the Proposal
- Explanation of the Value of Mutual Gains Negotiation
- Discussion and agreement on decision-making protocol
- Development of a Team Schedule and Roles and Responsibilities
- Development of Agreement on Team Principles and Expectations
- Discussion of EPA Interests and Strategic Questions

The attached agenda is a hypothetical example of a kick-off meeting designed for a team where the members have not worked together before and participants are concerned about some of the technical components of the proposal. This annotated agenda provides suggested types of questions, purposes for each section and expected products or results (see attached).

Step 4: Facilitating the Meeting

This guide offers suggestions about how to design and run a kick-off meeting. It is not designed to substitute for years of training and experience that professional facilitators and mediators undertake. The best way to ensure success as a facilitator is to try to keep in mind the following behaviors:

Ask questions and make suggestions.

- Rather than telling the group what they will be doing, ask participants how they would like to proceed.
- Ask open-ended questions to encourage participation. You get very little information from yes/no questions. Questions that start with what, where, when and how indicate open-ended questions.
- Suggest areas of agreement that might be possible (or ask someone else to suggest). Ask the group if they are in agreement with a specific proposal. If not, ask participants who do not agree "what it would take" for them to agree to the proposal.

Ensure that all participants understand the information.

- Ask the group often whether information is clear and understandable. This is particularly important with technical information. Body language and facial expressions are often good clues as to whether participants are following a conversation. If people are not following, ask speaker to explain the information in a different way or ask strategic questions of the speaker.

Explore underlying interests.

- It is tempting for participants to say things like, "this project won't work" or "the Office of X opposes this project." These statements can be very demoralizing for other participants. Ask questions to uncover the underlying reasons or "interests" for such statements.

Document areas of agreement as you move along.

C Keep a running tab of areas where the group agrees in principle on something (either process or technical). Writing down items of tentative or conditional agreement on flip charts can help the group keep track of the discussion, remind participants of what they have agreed to and make the group feel as though they are making progress.

Step 5: Following Up

Many groups fail to achieve their objectives not because participants are not engaged during meeting time, but that follow up items are never completed after the meeting. Keep a running list of action items, review these action items with the group again at the end of the meeting. Make sure to negotiate responsible parties and dates for the items as well, so that participants know clearly items for which they are responsible.