

# AWAG Conflict Management and Facilitation Orientation Course

On March 17 and 18, 2004, the Arkansas Watershed Advisory Group hosted a two-day workshop focusing on conflict management, communication skills, and facilitation orientation. Receiving special training in facilitation skills and conflict management will help to prepare AWAG representatives to be able to provide the support that local watershed partnerships need in getting their organizations started and becoming effective in their communities. Groups may encounter conflict even at the initial meeting of citizens interested in forming a watershed partnership. Participants will come from diverse backgrounds and may bring their special interests and personal agendas to discuss at the first meetings. Therefore, it is important to have well-planned facilitated meetings with agendas. The first meetings can set the stage for the group and can determine whether or not a local watershed effort will evolve.



***Organization and room dynamics can have an impact on the effectiveness of meetings.***

As requested by AWAG representatives, a two-day workshop in facilitation orientation and conflict management was scheduled as the 2004 second-quarter Arkansas Watershed Advisory Group meeting. The training was a continuation of the AWAG Watershed Planning and Technical Advisor Program, a program created by AWAG to provide specialized training for AWAG representatives that work with and provide support to local watershed partnerships.

Twenty-four participants representing six state agencies, two federal agencies, and two organizations attended the two-day training. The workshop participants consisted of persons who deal first-hand with the general public during meetings and person-to-person situations.

On the first day of training, Ms. Nancy Mathews, founder of Arkansas Conflict Management, Inc., provided a six hour session on “The Proactive Approach to Conflict and Negotiation.” Ms. Mathews who is also an instructor at the University of Arkansas Little Rock Bowen School of Law, noted that public disputes often occur while balancing environmental protection, economic growth, and jobs. Ms. Mathews’ four “keys” to a proactive approach to conflict management included:

1. Know Yourself
2. Communicate Effectively
3. Understand Conflict
4. Practice Interest-Based Negotiation

Prior to the class, participants were given the Keirsey Temperament Sorter II assessment that indicates personality types as described by Myers-Briggs. Ms. Mathews stressed the key to understanding others is to first understand yourself. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator enables people to:

- Gain greater understanding of individual personality types
- Become more attuned to the needs and preferences of others
- Become aware of how we react to stress & what we need in order to recover
- Recognize how these differences affect our interactions
- Increase effectiveness of communication
- Capitalize on our great diversity
- Clarify leadership & team behavior
- Provide framework for understanding and managing conflict

Listening and communication skills were also discussed. Ms. Mathews described the 12 Blocks to Listening and ways to overcome these blocks. This enables clear, open lines of communication between people and groups.

Ms. Mathews talked on the subject of remaining calm when someone pushes your “Hot Button”. Hot buttons are areas, subjects, topics, or beliefs to which you react strongly. When someone pushes your hot button, you tend to react without thinking. This can result in: *losing perspective, becoming angry, hurt, or defensive, under reacting or over reacting.*



***Ms. Nancy Mathews recorded the class’ Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.***

Ms. Mathews pointed out that conflict management is approached differently by each individual. She described the five responses to conflict that are influenced by personal goals and relationship goals. These include: *Avoidance, Accommodation, Competition, Collaboration, and Compromise.*

On day two of the workshop, Mr. Weldon Schieffer, from Oklahoma State University's Institute for Issue Management and Alternative Dispute Resolution (IIMADR), provided training in facilitation orientation and meeting management. Mr. Schieffer has extensive experience in environmental mediation and facilitation and participated in an earlier AWAG training on "Planning and Technical Assistance for Watershed Groups." Mr. Schieffer conducted a 6-hour orientation that focused on defining a facilitator, their duties, and the need for facilitated dialogue.

The working draft definition of a facilitator as defined by IIMADR is: *A voluntary, group communication process, either written or verbal, in which a neutral third-party or team of neutrals having no authority to render decisions for participants, actively engages with participating stakeholders, at the request of one or more of the participants, and with the group's approval and acceptance, to help participants link their interests and concerns within the context of their specific setting, by aiding and assisting them in ascertaining their needs, claims, and interests, and further addressing their concerns in an attempt to help them reach their outcome of interest.*



**Mr. Weldon Schieffer discussed meeting organization and facilitation strategies during day two of the training.**

Mr. Schieffer described the 10 Barriers of Conflict Resolution. They are:

1. Using words or symbols having different meanings
2. Differentiated values and interests
3. Perceptions of the same issue may differ
4. Status (or the perception of status) may be overemphasized
5. Conflicting interests/assumptions of risk
6. Making decisions by majority vote rather than seeking consensus
7. Keeping feelings out of the discussion
8. Alienating diversity
9. A one-way concept of collaboration/cooperation
10. Preconceived self-concepts of the role players



**David Weeks, NRCS, calls for a "timeout" during a role play session. Participants were able to play out real life situations that can occur during public meetings.**

Room dynamics and meeting organization can have an impact on the effectiveness of meetings. Mr. Schieffer stated that how a meeting room is set up can give a positive or negative feeling to participants before any dialogue is even exchanged. Keeping the meeting space free of "sides" and as interactive as possible is the best arrangement.

Both instructors utilized role play scenarios and group activities into their presentations. These techniques gave first-hand experience in real world situations dealing with real world issues.

The training sessions were well-received by the participants. The information shared by Ms. Mathews and Mr. Schieffer was highly useful and pertinent to situations that can often occur in meetings dealing with environmental issues. Eighteen of the twenty-four participants expressed interest in an additional 3-day Facilitator Course offered by Mr. Schieffer to be scheduled at a later date.