"The ideal of fully absent power is not only impossible to achieve; it is even hard to envision. We are all the products of power relations and exercise power by our very presence in the world."

—Jane Mansbridge, 2009

From a practitioner’s perspective, Jill M. Purdy’s framework for assessing the role and use of “power over, power to, or power for” in collaborative governance offers a welcome and significant tool for designing and facilitating deliberation on public policy issues. Managers and leaders who are interested in building collaborative capacity and convening collaborations should find her view of power dynamics both insightful and helpful. She correctly notes that using a “purely zero-sum, resource-based view of power” has proven inadequate for collaborative contexts. Instead, she introduces power as the “elephant in the room” but urges a more nuanced, resource-based view of power that moves...
beyond authority and rights-based approaches. She suggests that power in collaboration involves calling on tangible and intangible resources available to the participants and can change over time through interactions in collaborative governance processes.

For the past 22 years, I have directed a center based at Florida State University with a mission to facilitate consensus and support collaborative action on public policy issues in Florida and beyond. Our projects have taken place in the context of stakeholders working together with government to create new policies and plans or to address public problems. In a sense, we have been on the front lines of testing and using collaboration as a supplementary approach to governing. Our mission has been pursued even in the face of an incomplete legal foundation, constrained financial investment in collaborative efforts, and a political context in which the values of collaboration, including consensus, responsiveness, equity, inclusion, transparency, and accountability, may not be wholly shared by those exercising authority and making public decisions.

Our work has included 18 years of continuous collaborative project work with the Florida Department of Transportation in fashioning a stakeholder-based collaborative process for developing the last four statewide transportation plans and several related modal plans. Initially, our role was limited to designing and facilitating public input workshops on internally developed plan proposals. Then the agency turned to convening large and diverse stakeholder committees, and it empowered them through a consensus-building process to bring their perspectives to the table and to write the state plan with expert assistance of the agency staff and others. The “power to” collaboration perspective outlined by Dr. Purdy aptly describes the leadership approach adopted by four successive Florida transportation secretaries that “gave teeth to the collaborative effort” and curried stakeholder trust and willingness to repeat the exercise over the past 15 years.

Looking ahead, Dr. Purdy offers suggestions for adopting more explicit recognition of power in collaboration processes. This may prove challenging but potentially rewarding to practitioners, conveners, and participants in these collaborative efforts. While a simple evaluation and analysis of power dynamics of potential participants using a “five-point scale” based on Dr. Purdy’s framework may not be practical, the use of the framework in the convening assessment analysis could be very helpful in revealing a lack of awareness about different or unused sources of available power that may otherwise inhibit important stakeholders active participation in the collaboration process.

For practitioners, we might take a fresh look at our approaches and tools for conducting convening assessments in light of this framework. We tend to look at power imbalance as an important feasibility variable bearing on whether to recommend to a convener proceeding with a collaboration (Susskind and Thomas-Larmer 1999). More attention could be paid to educating conveners regarding the nuances of different sources of stakeholder power and to the benefits of “leveling the playing field” with its payoff in stakeholder support for implementing the collaboration results. The framework also illustrates how power in collaboration is both a resource-based concept and an emergent phenomenon that will be shaped by interactions and relationships developed through the collaborative process.

The more challenging proposition is using the assessment tool with participants throughout the collaboration to more explicitly evaluate the role of power dynamics in fashioning shared solutions. Beyond the very high level of trust that this would require of participants, there could be concerns about whether such an ongoing explicit evaluation of power dynamics may shift attention away from the building of trust and relationships, shared meaning, and consensus to how power is being deployed by various participants to achieve outcomes.

The framework presented by Dr. Purdy helps introduce the elephant in the room and sheds light on how the design of a collaborative process can develop new forms of power as well as shape the way power is exercised. It also helps illustrate the benefits of collaborative participation and power sharing in the context of finding solutions to public issues in a democratic system. As Jane Mansbridge observed, we are all the products of power relations exercising “power by our very presence in the world.” This framework offers a helpful structure that reveals the dynamics at work and, in turn, can inform the design and support of more inclusive and effective collaborations on policy issues that can produce consensus on both solutions and implementation actions.

Note
1. The FCRC Consensus Building Center (see http://consensus.fsu.edu) was created by the Florida state legislature and placed at Florida State University in 1988 to provide collaboration and dispute resolution assistance in growth-related conflicts and challenges. Since then, it has worked in land-use, environmental, transportation, energy, agriculture, and regulated industries contexts with local government, regional, state, and federal agencies and stakeholders.

References