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Revealing Cultural and Mental Models:

A first step to improve stakeholder engagement



Have you ever worked with stakeholders and wondered in frustration– “What can they be thinking?!” Or gotten the sense that your stakeholders are having those thoughts about you? Cultural understanding of the values, beliefs and attitudes people bring to the table can be the first step to overcoming barriers to solve environmental issues. Understanding the cultural roots of conflict can help you identify sources of conflict and create a pathway to shared understanding.

Course developed and led by:



wellsreserve
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Wells National Estuarine
Research Reserve

What will the training include?

In this workshop, you will learn about the ways mental and cultural models contribute to conflict and collaboration by participating in a situation map activity. This activity is designed to reveal sources of conflict and create a pathway to shared understanding.

You will learn how to:

- Identify the ways mental and cultural models contribute to conflict and collaboration
- Facilitate a stakeholder group through a situation map activity to build shared understanding of the system within which a situation is embedded
- Reveal the diversity of mental models used by stakeholders to create an understanding of the diverse ways individuals view environmental issues

How can cultural understanding facilitate collaboration?

Scientists, who are confident that their data is reliable, and regulators, who feel the laws are clear and fair, are often the stakeholders most baffled by the failure of resource users to understand and accept what to them is obvious. Practitioners of a new brand of environmental anthropology would see the situation differently. Cultural understanding of the values, beliefs and attitudes people bring to the table can help stakeholders in a participatory and collaborative process make sense of conflict. Understanding the cultural roots of conflict can be the first step to overcoming barriers to progress on environmental issues when stakeholders wonder in frustration – “What can they be thinking?!”

In this workshop, you will learn about the ways mental and cultural models contribute to conflict and collaboration. A mental model is a simplified representation of an individual's thought process about how something works in the "real world." Mental models function like maps, templates, and field guides as we move through the world, allowing us to unconsciously recognize the familiar, categorize without thinking, and link novel experiences to what we already know. We all use mental models to interpret and explain our experiences, make inferences and conclusions, and solve problems.

When mental models are shared within a culture or social group, they become cultural models. Cultural models also motivate us to act and guide our behavior. Members of a social group unconsciously use these shared perceptions and attitudes about how the world works, taking for granted that certain kinds of language and metaphors are shorthand for complex ideas. Our cultural models help us communicate with members of groups who share our way of thinking but they can hinder communication with people outside of those groups.

Mental and cultural models are cognitive concepts that organizers of a stakeholder engagement process can draw on to facilitate communication and to identify potential barriers to learning and cooperation in a group. Unexamined mental and cultural models can include false assumptions about what people in a group know and care about.

Speaker Biography:



Dr. Christine Feurt is the director of the Coastal Training Program at the Wells National Estuarine Research Reserve in Maine. She integrates natural and social science into stakeholder processes using the Collaborative Learning approach in order to sustain ecosystem services and build resilient coastal communities. Dr. Feurt worked for eleven years with the National Park Service in five coastal area parks, including two years as a ranger and biologist at Everglades National Park where she studied wading birds and aquatic food web relationships. Her Ph.D. in Environmental Studies is from Antioch University, New England, where her research examined the multiple ways people value water and how those values influence decision-making and action.