

Enhancing Collaboration in British Columbia's Regional Districts

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In collaboration with:

The Ministry of Community, Sport &
Cultural Development

The Union of B.C. Municipalities

The Local Government Management
Association

Updated: June 2014



Abstract

This study applies a quantitative mixed-method approach involving focus groups and interviews to investigate how a selection of British Columbia's Regional Districts (RDs) are currently preventing and addressing conflict, and determine how these local strategies can be utilized by RDs across B.C. Findings reinforce existing evidence that types of conflict that emerge when parties are unable to navigate through disagreement in a productive way can seriously inhibit organizational effectiveness in Regional Districts. They assert that RD cultures characterized by three major traits: trusting relationships, strong information sharing practices and a shared vision, are most effective at preventing and addressing this type of negative conflict. Findings suggest that RDs across B.C. could benefit from building these types of organizational cultures. Recommendations provide a number of means to accomplish this end, ranging from prioritizing in-person meetings to increasing the use of informal and bylaw-based service reviews.

This report has been completed in partial fulfillment of a Master's Degree in Dispute Resolution at the University of Victoria. Research was conducted in collaboration with the B.C. Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development, the Union of B.C. Municipalities and the Local Government Management Association.



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Acknowledgements

This project could not have been possible without the support of participants from Regional Districts across British Columbia. Thank you to Brian Reardon (CAO, Central Okanagan RD), Debra Oakman (CAO, Comox Valley RD), Paul Macklem (City Manager, Kelowna; former CAO, Central Okanagan RD), Greg Moore (Chair, Greater Vancouver RD), Rob Hutchins (Chair, Cowichan Valley RD), Donna Mikkelsen (CAO, Central Coast RD), Warren Jones (CAO, Cowichan Valley RD), Janis Bell (CAO, Cariboo RD), Gail Lowrey (Chair, Kitimat-Stikine RD), Al Richmond (Chair, Cariboo RD), Art Kaehn (Chair, Fraser-Fort George RD), Reg Moody (Chair, Central Coast RD) and Karen Goodings (Chair, Peace River RD). To those named and not named, thank you. The creativity, innovation and dedication you all bring to your work on a daily basis has been an inspiration.

Thank you to the entire Local Government Department at the Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development. Lois-Leah Goodwin, Brent Meuller, Danielle Lukovich, Karen Rothe, Nicola Marotz, Laird McLachlin, Cathy Watson, Marijke Edmonson and Derek Trimmer, thank you for sharing your expertise. In particular, thank you Michelle Dann and Gary Paget for your feedback throughout the writing process. In addition, thank you to the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria. Words can't express my appreciation to Dr. Jim McDavid for taking on this project at the eleventh hour, and to Dr. Kimberly Speers for acting as second reader.

Halfway through this project, I encountered a quote by John Wooden that read, "Whatever you do in life, surround yourself with smart people who'll argue with you." "Well," I thought, "at least I've got that part right." The final acknowledgement goes to Rejan Farley and Urszula Mezynska. Thank you both for your constructive feedback, unwavering enthusiasm and willingness to challenge me over the last year. This truly has been a collaborative effort and you have both taught me far more than what's recorded in this report.



1.0 Introduction

British Columbia's (B.C.) local government system is unique in Canada. B.C. is the only province that is divided into 27 Regional Districts (RDs) that provide regional governance and services, an administrative and political framework for inter-municipal and sub-regional service partnerships, and act as a local government for unincorporated areas (electoral areas). Regional Districts are part of the local government system; they are federations of municipalities and unincorporated areas that derive their authority to act from their member municipalities and electoral areas. In this context, the ability of RD members to effectively cooperate across jurisdictional boundaries is essential to achieve their mandates on behalf of the citizens their members represent. Facilitating and ensuring cooperation can be challenging, given that some of the most difficult issues today play out on a regional stage (Walisser, Paget & Dann, 2013, p. 158). Regional issues like solid waste management or regional economic development are characterized by numerous stakeholders, need for complete and sufficient information, fiscal pressures and the distribution of costs and benefits. Conflict between stakeholders is a natural part of this environment and, depending on how the organization addresses it, can either result in innovation and creative change or lead to damaged relationships and a reduced capacity to conduct RD business.

Research in organizational effectiveness generally finds that prolonged negative conflict, which emerges when parties are unable to navigate through disagreement in a productive way, reduces capacity to achieve organizational objectives (Plocharczyk, 2008, p. 88; see also Caudron, 1998). Anecdotal evidence collected as part of the *Dispute Resolution Capacity Building Initiative* at the Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development has also made it clear that RDs across British Columbia are responding to conflict in a variety of innovative and creative ways (MCSCD, 2012). An appreciation of these two fundamentals prompted this research project, *Enhancing Collaboration in British Columbia's Regional Districts*. Research questions were: what are RDs doing to prevent the emergence of conflict? What are RDs doing to address conflict, if it does emerge? How might other Regional Districts benefit from these strategies?

In the spring of 2013, local government administrators, elected officials and provincial staff came together and discussed these research questions in a series of focus groups in Victoria, B.C. Over the course of several months, they shared their unique insights and reflections as part of a group effort to expand the range of resources available to help Regional Districts engage with the various kinds of conflict inherent in their organizations. This report captures participant insights as part of a larger effort to enhance RD capacity to proactively prevent and effectively address conflict. Specifically, it highlights three common ingredients that are present in environments or situations where participants felt that they worked through conflict in a positive way: trusting relationships; strong information sharing practices; and a shared vision. This report details how RDs have facilitated the development of these



ingredients by sharing real-life success stories, reflections and insights offered by participants. It has been designed as a resource for local government staff and elected officials working in the Regional District context.

This report is divided into five chapters. Chapter One, *Background*, offers the theoretical rationale for conceiving of conflict as both a positive force for change, and a negative source of disruption. It also summarizes the historical context and current function of Regional Districts in B.C. In doing so, it constructs an argument for why this research is important for Regional Districts, and why approaching it using a functional conflict theory lens is helpful. Chapter Two, *Situating the Research*, situates this research in larger conversations unfolding in professional and academic circles on the challenges of regional governance and the role of conflict resolution in multi-stakeholder agreements. It explains how this project's findings, which highlight proactive strategies to prevent and address conflict, respond to an identified gap in literature that has been historically preoccupied with determining legislative or statutory fixes. *Methodology* (Chapter Three) follows, providing the theoretical and epistemological rationale behind the research method and the details of how this research was conceived, conducted and analyzed. Chapter Four, *Findings*, shares the major findings of this research. The fifth and final chapter, *Recommendations*, offers a number of conclusions drawn, from the findings, on how Regional Districts can build their capacities to prevent and address conflict.

Final Considerations

This research consists of a series of focus groups and interviews that, in total, included thirty-two local government elected officials, administrators and provincial staff. The author has endeavored to ensure representation from a range of small, medium and large Regional Districts of various levels of urbanization. However, this research is limited by the size of its sample pool; only thirteen of a possible twenty-seven Regional Districts were represented. As such, it is best understood as an indicative snapshot of a range of strategies used in Regional Districts, not an exhaustive or fully resonant list of solutions to regional problems.

Finally, the author has endeavored to capture the original meaning shared by participants through a variety of mechanisms described in *Methodology*. However, the nature of qualitative research methods means that misunderstandings can and do occur. Any opinions expressed in this report are the sole interpretation of the author and are not infallible representations of the participants or their organizations.

2.0 Background

2.1 Defining Conflict

Creating a standard definition of conflict and its causes has, ironically, caused a great deal of conflict over the years. Inter-personal and inter-group conflict has been alternately described as a biological imperative (Chapais, 1991), a dangerous and damaging social interaction (Chew, & Lim, 1995) and the catalyst of all human progress (Larue, 1977). Its causes have been identified as everything from inherent human aggression (Chapais, 1991; Konrad, 1966), to shortcomings in problem solving (Likert & Likert, 1976), to a manifestation of internal conflict (Kritek, 2002). For the purposes of this research, conflict is defined as the relationship between individuals or groups that emerges when there is a perceived divergence of expectations, goals or objectives. This report is particularly concerned with *manifest* conflict, or the relationship that emerges when individuals or groups take action based on this perceived divergence (Chicanot & Sloan, 2010, p. 4-5). Taking cues from John W. Burton's human needs theory of conflict, it assumes that all goals, expectations and objectives stem from each person's quest to fulfill their human needs (Burton, 1990).

While all conflict is caused by a perceived divergence in the strategies people or groups use to meet their needs, it does not progress in a uniform way. This research makes a critical distinction between productive and unproductive conflict. This distinction, made in the tradition of functionalist conflict theory, assumes that conflict is a natural part of social life and can have positive, as well as negative, social consequences (Coser, 1956). Unproductive conflict can occur between individuals, between individuals and groups, and between different groups and manifests when those engaged in the conflict are unable to navigate through the conflict in a productive way. When the conflict becomes unproductive, the aggression, hostility and suspicion it engenders leads to damaged relationships, lowered levels of trust, and inefficient decision making. In an organizational context, unproductive conflict disrupts regular routines, destroys relationships, and "prevents organizations from achieving its goals and missions because it misleads and confuses what is important to the organization" (Plocharczyk, 2008, p. 91). Productive conflict, on the other hand, is the "engine of social learning" and occurs when people have access to and apply the appropriate tools, skills and processes to productively work through the conflict (Brahm, 2004). It acts as a catalyst for promoting change, prevents stagnation and apathy and facilitates creativity and innovation. In an organizational context, conflict is productive when it enables people to clarify and strengthen their goals and drives, unites diverse groups and improves communication lines (Plocharczyk, 2008, p. 91).



2.2 The Regional District Context

Local government scholars and policy makers have long recognized the limitations of traditional “top-down” governance systems in managing complex regional issues. Propelled by the increase of cross-jurisdictional interdependencies caused by post-WWII economic expansion, these same scholars and policy makers have endeavored to create effective regional governance structures with varying levels of success. In this context, British Columbia’s Regional District (RD) system has proven to be a true success story. Created over forty years ago, it has addressed and resolved many challenges that continue to plague other North American jurisdictions (Bish, 2006, p. 34). This section provides a brief introduction to the RD system. In closely examining the history and structure of RDs, it explains why collaboration and cooperation are, by design, critical mechanisms in the RD system.

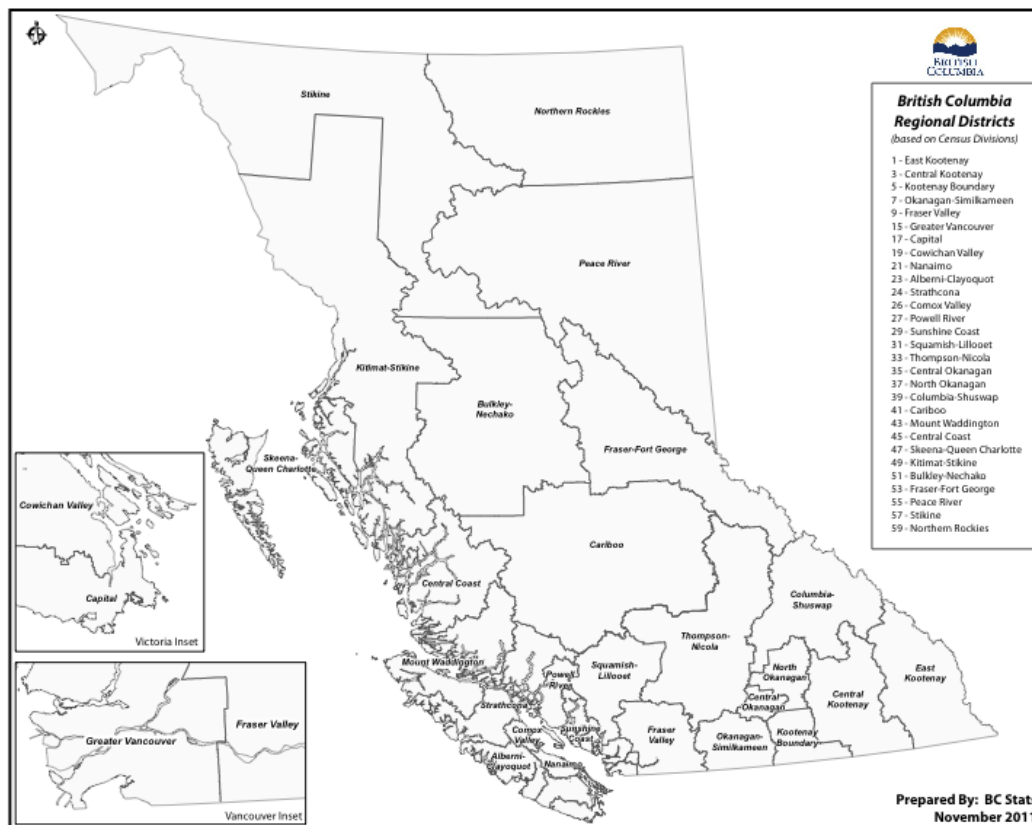
2.2.1 Regional Districts: A Brief History

British Columbia’s mountainous and inaccessible terrain has concentrated nearly 87% of its population in 1.4% of its total area (Bish, 2006, p. 35). This limited availability for settlement meant that in the post-WWII years of economic expansion, municipalities were forced to cooperate with one another far earlier than in other Canadian Provinces. By the 1960s, BC was faced with a series of serious regional issues, a few of which included:

- Unregulated growth in unincorporated (rural) areas that resulted in lack of access to critical services like water and fire protection;
- “Free-rider” circumstances where unincorporated area residents used municipal-funded services like recreation centres and regional hospitals without paying a fair share of the costs; and
- A limited ability to gain economies of scale in the provision of key services ranging from garbage disposal to water treatment.

Finding a politically palatable solution for these issues was no easy task. Municipal governments were vehemently opposed to surrendering any authority or power over service provision, and unincorporated areas demanded significant political voice that was unsupported by any existing local government structure (MCSCD, 2013b). Closely involving municipalities in the design of the new regional government system proved to be the best approach. Extensive municipal consultation in the early 1960s resulted in amendments to the *Municipal Act* that established the Regional District framework. The legislation was purposely generalized; it gave the members of the new regions the power to identify and pursue regional responsibilities. It emphasized the value of local knowledge and autonomy, as well as the need for inter-jurisdictional collaboration (Bish, 2008, p. 61).

Figure 1: British Columbia's Regional Districts



Regional District Structure

Today, the 27 Regional Districts that cover almost the entire province all have the same basic governing structure. A governing board is composed of elected municipal officials appointed to the board by their municipal councils and directly elected members from electoral areas. The total number of board members (Directors) and their voting strength is determined by voting units unique to each RD. These voting units are usually set to match the population of the smallest member municipality. Thus, if a voting unit were 1,500 an electoral area of 7,000 would have five votes and a municipality of 24,000 would have 17 votes (*note: result is raised to the next whole number*). The number of Directors for each political unit is determined by dividing the number of votes by five; thus, an EA of 7,000 would have one Director with a voting strength of five while a municipality of 24,000 would have four Directors with a voting strength of seventeen. The voting strength for Comox Valley RD is included by way of explanation:

Voting Strength for Comox Valley Regional District Voting Unit: 1500 (MCSCD, 2012)

Political Unit	Population (2011 Census)	Number of Directors (voting strength/5)	Voting Strength (population/voting unit)
City of Courtenay	24,099	4	17
Town of Comox	13,627	2	10
Village of Cumberland	3,398	1	3
Electoral Area A	6,899	1	5
Electoral Area B	7,190	1	5
Electoral Area C	8,325	1	6

Voting rules are situation-dependent. In general, most issues are decided by an unweighted corporate vote of “one Director, one vote” while money matters (e.g. adoption of the annual financial plan) are decided by a weighted corporate vote (one Director, variable number of votes) for all Directors. Decisions on administration and operation of RD services are decided by the weighted votes of Directors from participating areas. The board is supported in its work by a Regional District staff led by a Chief Administrative Officer. Much like their municipal counterparts, this administrative branch of the Regional District performs a range of administrative functions from delivering services, to administering Regional District finance, to regional planning. Staff size varies greatly according to needs of the Regional District.

The RD system as a whole is built on six principles that emphasize the voluntary and consensual nature of service provision, as well as the importance of equivalency in paying for services. They are:

- Federal/Confederal** RDs are part of, and not apart from, the municipal system.
- Voluntary** Apart from the few services mandated by provincial legislation¹, RDs only provide services to which their members agree.
- Consensual** RDs only do what their municipal members and the public agree they should do. This requires consensus among the majority of members and is quite different from relying on direct power or statutory authority.

¹ Regional District functions mandated are: general government for unincorporated areas; long-term capital financing for municipal members; hospital capital financing; land use planning in rural areas; solid waste management; and emergency planning.



Flexible	RDs have a high degree of flexibility to determine what services they will provide and at what scale.
Fiscal equivalence	Legislation requires close matching between the benefits and costs of services to ensure that RD residents “pay for what they get”.
Soft boundaries	Each service provided by RDs has a distinct boundary determined by the natural scope of the service in question. This principle is closely related to the principles of flexibility and fiscal equivalence.

A fulsome description of these principles can be accessed in the *Regional District Primer* (MCSCD, 2006).

2.2.2 Regional District Functions

All Regional Districts have three major roles. First, they act as a general-purpose local government for unincorporated areas within their boundaries. This means they provide democratic representation and deliver services ranging from land-use regulation to noise control. Second, they provide a political and administrative framework for providing region-wide services including solid waste management and emergency telephone services. This administrative framework also supports regional land use planning in the form of regional growth strategies. Third, RDs provide the political and administrative framework necessary for inter-municipal or sub-regional services through the creation of benefiting areas. Benefiting areas are created by groups of municipalities and/or unincorporated areas that come together to establish a service such as pest control, economic development or recreation facilities. Each service is characterized by two central qualities: it is independent of other services, and it has customized boundaries designed to ensure only those that pay for the service benefit from that service. Benefiting areas are established through a service establishment bylaw. Service arrangements may be re-evaluated from time to time through formal or informal service reviews and, in some cases, participants may withdraw from the service.

2.2.3 Challenges for Regional Districts

Many of the most complex issues of our time play out “in regional space” (Walisser, Paget & Dann, 2013, p. 158). Issues ranging from public transit and arterial transportation infrastructure to air quality and economic development planning do not fit neatly into political or geographic boundaries. Decisions taken on regional matters have unequal impacts across geography, often resulting in “area-based winners and losers” (Walisser, Paget & Dann, 2013, p. 154). The complexity of these problems are further exacerbated



by what scholars Sørensen and Torfing call a “growing cross pressure” between high expectations of the public sector, limited public resources and ongoing fiscal constraints. They observe that, in many jurisdictions, citizens demand better and more individualized public solutions and services while maintaining a strong opposition to increased public spending (2012, p. 3).

Regional Districts are widely recognized as an innovative framework for regional governance that has “lowered the cost of cooperation among neighboring jurisdictions, encouraged fiscal equivalence, and improved the performance of local government” (Bish, 2006, p. 34). They are widely recognized as a form of local government “able to meet the unique and changing circumstances of particular regions, capture economies of scale, and ensure local choice in assigning functions and services” (Regional District Task Force, 2010, p. 4). This does not mean, however, that they are immune to the pressures and challenges inherent in regional governance. In some regions, it is difficult to establish services at an efficient scale and distribute costs effectively. Changing demographics have made relationships between municipalities and unincorporated fringe areas tense. Frictions among governments, fueled by limited resources and diverse objectives, can become a barrier to regional coordination (Regional District Task Force, 2010, p. 4). In this context, providing the tools to prevent and address conflict is an important part of ensuring the continued success of the Regional District model.

2.3 Important Underlying Assumptions

This chapter has articulated a theoretical approach to conflict and summarizes the historical development of Regional Districts, their current governance model and their central functions. Several assumptions that are grounded in the literature, and what we know of Regional Districts, are particularly important:

Each Regional District is unique: Regional Districts have evolved to respond to the unique interests and needs of their members. As such, each Regional District must address issues that are unique and context-dependent; solutions to these issues must be individually tailored.

Regional issues are complex: Staff and elected officials that work in Regional Districts are faced with problems that are often complex, characterized by changing or incomplete information, involve numerous interdependent stakeholders and fiscal constraints.

Conflict can be either productive or unproductive: Given the complexity of regional issues, conflict is a natural and normal occurrence. Depending on the strategies individuals use, this conflict can lead to innovation, creativity and positive change or to stagnation, damaged relationships and a reduced ability to achieve organizational objectives.



Cooperation is a key part of Regional District governance: In the context of local government autonomy and few mandated services, RD Directors must work together to identify the type and scope of services they will provide. RDs provide a “systematic, cost-effective framework for facilitating cooperation among local governments” (Bish, 2008, p. 62). In order to achieve their fullest potential, Directors must be able to cooperate with one another on regional objectives. Cooperation is promoted when conflict, a natural by-product of social activity, is addressed with skills, tools and processes that enable people to work through conflict even when it is difficult.

Readers are invited to keep these assumptions in mind while reading the *Findings* and *Discussion* sections of this report, as they lend valuable context to the unique political and administrative space in which RDs exist.

3.0 Situating this Research

This research has been prompted and informed by three larger academic discussions on how to best address trans-jurisdictional public problems. The first seeks to determine the best governance framework for making regional decisions. The second highlights the “softer” side of governance by investigating the relationship between political/organizational culture and inter-local cooperation. The third can be characterized as a long-standing tradition of reflection and inquiry leading to improvement in the B.C. Regional District system. This section briefly summarizes each discussion and provides readers with resources for further learning. It is foundational to the *Recommendations* section later in this report. The terms trans-jurisdictional, inter-local and regional are used interchangeably. In the context of this review, they reference relations between two or more local governments operating within a geographic region within a Province or State.

3.1 Competing frameworks for regional governance

Two camps have traditionally dominated the debate over what government framework best responds to regional public problems: the reform-consolidation school and the market-public choice school. The reform-consolidation model argues for the centralization of government through the creation of mega-regions, arguing that governmental fragmentation “seriously damages local capacity for solving region-wide public problems” (Visser, 2002, p. 41). The amalgamation of the Metropolitan Toronto Region and its six municipalities into the city of Toronto illustrates the centralization of regional decision-making power. An opposing school of thought, the market-public choice model, is oriented towards decentralization rather than centralization. Drawing from the public choice school, it views “strong, autonomous local governments as the building blocks of healthy urban regions” (Visser, 2002, p. 41). British Columbia’s RD system, which provides a framework for *voluntary* inter-local cooperation in order to provide regional services, is an example of this second model.

In the 1990s, new voices began to argue that the complex regional issues could not be resolved without considering broader citizen engagement and a new model was proposed. Proponents of the *participatory democracy* model began to argue that governments no longer had the authority to impose public solutions; governing in the 21st century means engaging with a citizenry that is “more educated and informed on issues, and correspondingly less willing to defer to leaders” (Lenihan, 2012, p. 24). Scholars including John Dryzek (2010) and James Fishkin (2011) now argue that regional governments of all stripes need to include private stakeholders and citizens in a meaningful way in order to garner the public support necessary for regional initiatives. Scholars like Judith Innes & David Booher (2009) and Don Lenihan



(2010) have suggested new strategies and frameworks that facilitate citizen collaboration in the development of new policies including citizen juries, world cafés and collaborative mapping.

3.2 Organizational/Political Culture and inter-local cooperation

The second discussion concerns the impact of organizational/political culture on inter-local cooperation. It grew from the recognition that “form” solutions – ones that focus on governance structure that offer regulatory solutions – often fail to adequately consider the “people” part *within* government. Scholarship identifying the relationship between political culture and political action began with essays linking communication theory and political integration (Deutsch, 1964; 1966) and the relationship between political culture and economic growth (Hofstede & Bond, 1988). More recently, scholars like James Visser (2002) have explicitly argued that the needs, values and interests of the individual actors within a political organization (such as a Regional District) have a direct influence on policy development and should, therefore, be considered alongside any structural “fixes” to governance problems (See also McGuire, 2000 and Nunn & Rosentraub, 1997).

Research on the relationship between political culture and inter-jurisdictional cooperation can be supplemented by extensive scholarship on organizational dynamics – particularly the link between organizational culture and effectiveness (see Cooper, Dewe & O’Driscoll, 2001; De Dreu, Van Dierendonck & Dijkstra, 2004 and Plochaczyk, 2008). Research on the positive correlation between productive conflict and organizational creativity is of particular interest (see Caudron, 1998). However, no work comments on the relationship between RD culture and the success with which it achieves its mandates. This project was prompted, in part, by this gap in the literature.

3.3 Ongoing Improvements in Regional Districts

The third discussion is best characterized as an ongoing process of improvement that has resulted in significant changes to the Regional District system since its inception in 1965. The 1971 *Municipal Finance Authority Act*, for instance, responded to municipal difficulty in accessing financial capital by allowing municipalities to pool their assets and borrowing requests through their Regional District. An extensive consultation process with the Union of B.C. Municipalities (UBCM) between 1986 and 1989 resulted in the elimination of innumerable cabinet approvals for RD initiatives, thus increasing RD decision-making power. Regional District legislation was updated again in 2000, where local concerns over financial planning and the ability to create and finance unique services resulted in an expansion of corporate powers and requirement for a five-year financial plan. This research project can be framed as the most recent, but certainly not the final, chapter in an ongoing process of proactive evaluation and improvement. Readers looking for more information on the history of quality improvements in



RDs are encouraged to consult the “mini-histories” of Regional Districts provided on the MCSCD website (MCSCD 2013a; MCSCD 2013b).

3.4 Situating this Research

This section has provided a brief summary of three of the most relevant aspects of this field in hopes of highlighting two items. First, there is a broad appreciation for the complexities of regional governance and little consensus over what is the most effective way to approach what are ultimately context-specific problems. Second, there is a growing appreciation, across disciplines, of the impact political and organizational culture has on governance.

In conducting this research, I seek to make an empirical contribution to larger discourses on how to address regional public problems by mobilizing the real-life experiences and lessons of local government administrators and elected officials. This is done in hopes of these lessons and experiences being utilized by others on the ground, dealing with the thorny business of regional governance.

4.0 Methodology

The preceding chapters have articulated the rationale for *why* this research has been conducted. This chapter explains exactly *how* primary data was collected and analyzed, and justifies the particular qualitative research methodology that was employed. The following pages will explain a research methodology characterized by three central design features: a mixed purposive sampling strategy; an inductive approach to developing questioning routes and facilitating discussions, focus groups and interviews; and a thematic approach to analysis.

4.1 Research Epistemology

The ultimate goal of this project is to increase Regional District capacity to proactively prevent and resolve conflict. It assumes that local government professionals can positively affect their work environments if they have access to the stories, reflections and observations of other professionals who have successfully done so. This type of research objective reflects an essentialist or realist approach to how knowledge and truth are formed. A realist (or essentialist) approach assumes that a researcher can “theorize motivations, experience and meaning in a straightforward way, because a simple, largely unidirectional relationship is assumed between meaning and experience and language” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85). In other words, this approach assumes that the stories, reflections and observations that local government professionals offered in the course of this research are meaningful reflections of their experiences and that a researcher can draw conclusions and make generalizations based on the exact words provided by participants.

4.2 Research Design

This project was inspired by the challenges and concerns expressed by people working in the Regional District sector. As the ultimate purpose of the research is to contribute knowledge that will help people change their environments, it is best characterized as a form of *applied research* (Patton, 1990 p. 153). This project can be situated, however, in a larger environment of *action research* where local government professionals are constantly engaged in informal research to improve their environments. The insights reflected in this project can and should be seen as part of an action research agenda that, in Patton’s words, “purposefully becomes part of the change process” (1990 p. 153).

Unlike basic research, which is conducted for the sake of knowledge itself, applied research endeavors to apply the accumulated knowledge of basic research to real-world issues. Consequently, it resides in the messier “real world” and relies, as the next section will explain,



on more flexible research methodologies that seek to establish themes and insights rather than statistically significant patterns. As the objective of this research was to gather and mobilize the grassroots insights of local government professionals rather than to test a theoretically derived hypothesis, it was guided by an inductive qualitative design. This means that the research was exploratory; it asked open questions and inductively developed categories, dimensions and interrelationships based on participant responses (Patton, 1990, p. 40).

4.3 Data Collection

Phase One: MCSCD Group Discussions

Primary research began in February 2013 with two facilitated small group discussions held at the Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development (MCSCD) in Victoria, B.C. These discussions were exploratory in nature and were designed to harness the cumulative insights of experienced local government professionals who have worked with multiple Regional Districts across the Province. The objectives for this phase of the research were twofold. First, these group discussions gathered general provincial perspectives and observations on conflict and collaboration in Regional Districts. This information helped solidify the researcher's understanding of the nuances of the Regional District system and, in turn, informed the development of focus group questions for the second phase of data collection. Second, the group discussions invited specific suggestions for case studies and participants to be recruited for second and third phases of data collection. It is important to note that the project clients were particularly interested in the insights and stories that could be provided by local government professionals at the RD level. As such, data gathered from MCSCD group discussions has not been explicitly included in project findings. Rather, these groups helped reinforce the researcher's own knowledge of RD governance and issues, and informed the development of focus group questions.

A total of ten Ministry staff members were recruited to participate in one of two group discussions based on a *snowball sampling strategy*. Snowball sampling, or *chain sampling*, is a popular approach for locating information-rich key informants in qualitative research that begins with the question, "Who knows a lot about ____?" (Patton, 1990, p. 176). The project clients, who themselves are experienced and well-established provincial staff, were asked who they thought could provide valuable insight and sent letters of invitation based on their feedback. Given my own "outsider" position, this sampling strategy ensured that I would not miss key informants.

In accordance with current best practices in focus group research, questions were clear, short, and open-ended, and designed to evoke focused conversation (Kreuger and Casey, 2009, p. 37). They were:

- What do you think are some of the key skills, tools, and processes that productively manage conflict and promote collaboration at the RD level?



- Which RDs have *demonstrated* these?
- Which RDs have experienced *challenges*?

These group discussions informed the design of the major research events: focus group interviews and one-on-one interviews. While all group discussions were digitally recorded, handwritten notes were also taken. As the facilitator, I actively participated by asking questions and summarizing contributions.

Phase Two: RD Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews are a highly efficient qualitative data collection technique that increases the sample size of participants, invites focused discussion and self-disclosure and enables participants to direct the flow of conversation to topics that are most relevant to their experiences (Kruger & Casey, 2009, pp. 2-6; Patton, 1990, pp. 335-336). In April 2013 a total of 18 Regional District senior staff and elected officials participated in two 90-minute focus groups held at Local Government House in Victoria, B.C. These focus groups were the main research event in this project and were designed to elicit the stories, observations, and insights that would inform the project research questions.

Focus groups are traditionally composed of *homogeneous* samples, or groups of participants that are similar to each other in a way that is significant to the research question. In order to ensure homogeneity among participants, this research exclusively recruited the administrative and political leaders in Regional Districts: Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs) and Chairs (also known as Chief Executive Officers or CEOs). Conveniently, this research coincided with the annual Union of B.C. Municipalities RD CAO/CEO forum in Victoria, B.C. This meant that local government professionals from across the Province could participate in the focus groups. Invitations to participate were sent out to all forum registrants, regardless of the size of their Regional District. The final participant list represented thirteen Regional Districts of varied populations and geographies.

In order to promote homogeneity among participants, participants were divided into two groups. The first focus group consisted of nine RD Chairs, and the second group was composed of nine RD Chief Administrative Officers. In accordance with current best practices, the questioning route was designed to generate the maximum amount of creative input and insight. Specifically, questions were designed to generate curiosity in the listener, stimulate reflective conversation, surface underlying assumptions and to evoke more questions (Vogt, Brown & Isaacs, 2003, p. 4). Participants were asked to think expansively not only about their current work environment, but about what it could become. The questions were:

1. Imagine an RD environment where you and others want to work through conflict together, even when it's difficult. Can you describe some of the key features of this environment?



2. Given your experience, what are some of the challenges and barriers to achieving this kind of environment?
3. What can be done to overcome these challenges and barriers?
4. What is one major take-away you would share?

Like the group discussions, these focus groups were audio-recorded and I took handwritten notes throughout.

Phase Three: Interviews

The data collection concluded with seven one-on-one interviews lasting from twenty minutes to ninety minutes in length. These interviews were semi-structured and designed to elicit particular information from participants. Put another way, the group interview portion of this research formed the central framework of the findings; the interviews helped fill gaps in this framework with detailed descriptions and examples.

Interview participants were invited to participate based on leads found during the course of focus groups. As will be explained in full in the next section, an interim analysis of group discussion and focus group transcripts identified a series of potential case studies or examples to highlight in the research report. Participants who had indicated their willingness to continue contributing to the research in consent forms signed before the focus group were contacted directly and asked to provide additional information about key themes identified after focus group transcripts had been analyzed. As such, sampling is best characterized as *opportunistic*; there were no particular interview participants in mind at the beginning of data collection.

Interviews were conducted by phone and were guided by an *interview guide* approach where topics and issues to be covered were specified in advance, but the sequence and wording of the questions were developed over the course of each interview (Patton, 1990, p. 288). Interviewees were provided with a short description of the topic that they would be asked to elaborate on in advance, as part of the invitation to participate. All phone interviews were voice-recorded; handwritten notes were taken throughout.

4.4 Data Analysis

Analysis, like data collection, occurred in several distinct phases. The first phase began after group discussions and focus groups were complete but before individual interviews were scheduled. I used a thematic approach to analysis which involved searching across the entire data set - in this case, two group discussions and two focus group interviews - to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 86). I structured this using the first four of six phases suggested in Braun and Clark's article "Using thematic analysis in psychology" (2008).



1. First, I personally transcribed all audio recordings. Unlike constructionist, discourse or narrative analysis, thematic analysis does not require the same level of detail in transcription; all recordings were transcribed verbatim but did not include the nuances of tone, emphasis or cadence. This process also helped familiarize me to the data, as suggested by qualitative research interviewing experts Kvale & Brinkmann (2009, p. 180).
2. Next, I generated initial codes across the entire data set and collected data relevant to each code. Codes identify a feature of the data that is interesting to the researcher and serve as the first step to generating meaningful conclusions from a data set. My codes were data-driven and inductive, meaning that they were generated inductively as I read transcriptions. I generated over 60 distinct codes including “teamwork”, “trust” and “leadership” that I attributed to various parts of the transcribed material.
3. The third phase began when all the data was coded and collated. From the initial list of 60 codes, I began to group similar codes into theme groups using a series of mind-maps and matrixes. At the conclusion of this phase, I had a set of central themes that I could begin to refine with the help of my clients.
4. In the fourth phase, I worked to refine themes by returning to the original data set (raw transcriptions) to determine if they adequately represented the information there. I further refined these themes with the help of my clients. At this juncture, I identified themes that needed more information and compiled a list of potential interview topics.

Once a list of potential interview topics was developed I recruited participants and conducted the interviews. I then transcribed the interviews, inserted the information into the themes and completed the last two phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun & Clark: (5) I defined the themes and determined which examples would best illustrate the theme, and (6) I wrote the final report (2006, p. 87).

4.5 Ensuring Validity

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument. This means that validity in qualitative methods relies, in large part, on the rigor and skill of the researcher conducting it (Patton, 1990, p. 180). Given the subjective nature of qualitative research, it is impossible to assure complete validity; I have, however, employed a number of strategies to take steps in this direction. Throughout the research process, I have endeavored to be transparent in my research paradigm and methodology (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009. pp. 261-263). I have engaged in consistent feedback loops with participants in order to establish communicative validity and ensure that I understood their contributions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 253). This was accomplished through follow up phone calls by inviting participants to edit and approve any direct quotations included in the project report. Finally, I have worked closely with my clients, who are experts in the field of Regional District governance, in order to reach agreement on themes and content. Once we established these themes, we “reality checked them” by



presenting summaries of the findings at two professional conferences: the 2013 Local Government Management Association Conference in Kelowna, B.C. and the Union of B.C. Municipalities Convention in Vancouver, B.C. This collaborative meaning-making among experts is called dialogical intersubjectivity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 240) and is a critical part of assuring qualitative research is valid.

4.6 Ethics

The research described above received a certificate of approval from the Human Research Ethics Board of the Office of Research Services at the University of Victoria on February 22, 2013.

4.7 Limitations of this research

Constraints on time and resources meant that a full range of Regional Districts could not be involved in this research; thirteen of twenty-seven were represented. Furthermore, the homogeneous nature of participant samples means that this report focuses exclusively on the contributions of senior Ministry staff, Regional District CAOs and Regional District Chairs. Also, municipal staff and elected officials were not represented in this research.

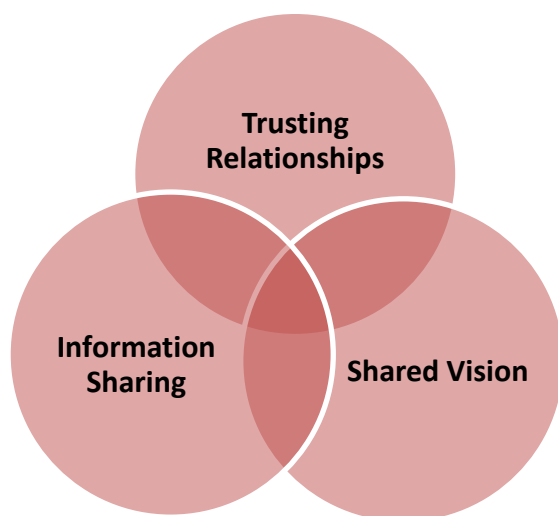
5.0 Findings

The remaining chapters in this report engage directly with the reflections, stories, recommendations and insights offered by local government elected officials and administrators who participated in focus groups and/or interviews in the spring of 2013. This short preface introduces the research findings and explains the structure of *Findings*.

5.1 Introduction to Findings

This research was guided by the research questions: What are RDs doing to prevent the emergence of conflict? What are RDs doing to address conflict, if it does emerge? What tools, skills and processes have they used? How might other Regional Districts benefit from these tools, skills and processes?

The open-ended nature of these questions provoked an impressive depth and breadth of responses. After a thematic analysis of focus groups and interviews (see *Methodology*), several key factors emerged. This research has found that RD environments characterized by trusting relationships, strong information sharing practices and a shared vision are well equipped both to prevent the emergence of negative conflict to and address conflict that does emerge.



As illustrated in the Venn Diagram (left), these themes are interrelated; the relative strength or weakness of one can impact the others. As such, strategies and processes compiled within one theme can easily be framed in the others, and pursuing strategies suggested in each section can positively influence other parts of the Regional District. They are best imagined as *ingredients* that can contribute to an environment where people can effectively collaborate through conflict, even when

competing interests, complex issues and limited resources can make it very difficult.

Section I: Trusting Relationships. In the words of one RD Board Chair, “it’s all about relationships”. Contributors were unequivocal; developing and maintaining trusting relationships is a crucial part of creating an environment where conflict is resolved in a positive way. This section explores how trusting relationships have influenced conflict in Regional



Districts. It integrates direct observations, stories and reflections shared by participants and highlights concrete strategies used by local government professionals to facilitate and promote trust in their RD.

Section II: Strong information sharing practices. Contributors agreed that strong information sharing practices are a critical element in a RD environment that prevents and addresses conflict. This section explores the successes and challenges experienced by Regional Districts in creating and maintaining these practices. By integrating concrete examples and direct quotations provided by contributors, it highlights how having early and ongoing interest-based communication, clear and accessible written records and the opportunity to discuss complex issues have made positive differences in Regional Districts across the province.

Section III: A shared vision. Contributors agreed that local autonomy is a crucial element in a federated body like a Regional District, and emphasized the importance of integrating local ideas, circumstances and issues into any shared vision. Simultaneously, contributors reflected that a shared vision has a dramatically positive impact on the Regional District environment, particularly when there are contentious items or issues at play. This section explores the complexities of balancing local autonomy with regional cohesion. It highlights how strategies like strategic planning, informal and bylaw-based service reviews, interest-based group conversations, field trips and codes of conduct can develop a shared regional vision.

Each chapter is supplemented by supporting academic and professional research that helps contextualize findings and provides useful resources for further information. The *Findings* section aims to provide readers with an understanding of why each of the three factors identified are important in the RD context and offers a range of practical strategies for developing and enhancing these factors.

5.2 Relationships Built on Trust

The nature of relationships between individuals has an enormous impact on how a Regional District does business. Participants in this research agreed that relationships built on mutual trust can facilitate creative problem solving, collaboration and perseverance in the face of complex and contentious issues. Trust promotes effective knowledge transfer that, in turn, increases the likelihood of good decision-making. Relationships characterized by distrust and misinformation lead, in turn, to tense work environments, decreased creativity and inefficient decision-making.

Interpersonal relationships in any large group are heterogeneous; no one organization is composed of exclusively “positive” or “negative” relationships. Over the course of this research, however, it became clear that certain types of relationships were common to RD environments or instances where conflict was dealt with in positive and creative ways. Contributors used the words “trust” and “respect” to describe relationships that increase the likelihood of working collaboratively through difficult situations. This section shares a wide range of reflections on the role of trusting relationships in preventing and addressing conflict and highlights strategies used by Regional Districts to build relationships between three key groups of people: between board members and Regional District staff, between board members, and between RD and municipal staffs.

What is Trust?

In organizational research, **trust** is commonly defined as “The willingness of an actor to be vulnerable based on positive expectations about the intentions or actions of another under conditions of uncertainty and interdependence” (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712). It involves a positive expectation that any vulnerability will not be exploited.

Recently, distinctions have been made between **professional trust** – interpersonal trust triggered by an expectation of an individual’s competence and intent based on their professional role – and **personal trust** – based on long-term personal experience. Professional trust – the most applicable type in board-staff relations, involves a “reliance on another’s skills, knowledge, and judgement and, as such, is accompanied by accepting influence and interdependence” (Alexopoulos & Buckley, 2013, p. 366).

What is respect?

Like “trust”, “respect” is a difficult term to define exhaustively. Organizational research highlights the importance of **respectful behavior** in creating a positive workplace environment. This behavior is often characterized by what it is *not* – respectful behavior excludes intimidation, bullying, and harassment, as well as unequal treatment based on religious, sexual or gendered identity (Mahoney, 2012, p. 13).

5.2.1 Strategies to build trusting relationships between Board Members and RD Staff

Contributors agreed that both CAOs and RD Board Chairs are most effective when they work together as a leadership team. Several participants emphasized the need to be in constant communication with their Chair or CAO counterpart in order to ensure there is no miscommunication and that they divide tasks appropriately. Chair Greg Moore explained,

I think first and foremost it's crucial to have good dialogue with your CAO. You just need to be in constant contact and working off the same playbook, because there are some issues that are more appropriate if I deal with, and some are more appropriate for my CAO to deal with. Regardless of who's dealing with members, it's important that we go back and trade notes about what went on.

Open and transparent communication between the CAO/Chair team ensures that the CAO can direct staff appropriately and that the Chair can work with members to proactively identify issues before they get to the board table. It also helps to develop trust, which is an indispensable part of any effective team. For Chair Al Richmond and CAO Janis Bell, open communication goes beyond regular updates; they agree to “not let anything fester”. Chair Richmond explained,

You have to have a very strong relationship with your CAO. It has to be open and transparent. We don't let anything fester, and if there's something that happens in a meeting or something that bothers me, she's going to know about it. If something bothers her, I'm going to know about it.

Looking to the Literature

According to some estimates, the words used during face-to-face communication account for only 7% of how a message is received. *Para-language*, or the tone and speed of delivery, is responsible for 38% of our sent message, and body language – facial expressions and body posture – account for 55% of our sent message (Druckman, Rozelle & Baxter, 1982). This suggests that parties in conflict must consider the *whole message* – and not just the words they employ. If meaning is being lost over email communications, consider speaking on the phone or in person.

This close relationship ensures that there is a strong leadership team that can, as later chapters illustrate, help create a collaborative board environment and help create a strong collective vision for the Regional District.

The need for trust goes beyond the CAO/Chair leadership team. Many contributors agreed that it is important for all board members to trust their RD staff. Some observed that a lack of trust between board members and their RD staff can lead to decreased trust in staff recommendations, reports or presentations. They found that the subsequent process of re-checking and defending a report leads to decreased efficiency in decision-making and decreased staff morale.



During his tenure as CAO, Paul Macklem found that connecting board members and staff and increasing staff visibility was an indispensable part of developing trust between staff and their RD Board. He made it a priority to increase staff visibility through frequent presentations to the RD Board on program areas of interest. He commented,

Board members from member municipalities need to adopt staff members at the RD like they are their own... many don't. And of course, the responsibility doesn't lie solely with these Board members. It is the CAO's job to connect the Board with staff...

The quality and tone of the presentations was one strategy he used to build trust and respect between the board members and staff. He worked with staff to ensure presentations were succinct, easily understood and engaging. He also required that any presentation must be vetted and all presenters must go through several dry runs with a mock question-and-answer period afterwards. Any visual aids like handouts or PowerPoints had to be succinct and accessible. This, he observed, increased staff confidence in their work and impressed board members who, in turn, developed greater confidence in and professional respect for the staff.

Looking to the Literature

Participant observations on the positive impact of eating together are supported by research like “Breaking Bread and Breaking Boundaries”, a case study on increasing organizational learning and fostering communities of practice through sharing meals (Watland, Hallenbeck & Kresse, 2008). These authors argue that “the value of meal sharing [is] almost exclusively studied within the context of family interactions, [but] parallel outcomes seem possible for organizations” (p. 169).

5.2.2 Strategies to build relationships between board members

Unlike municipal councils, Regional District boards usually meet only once or twice a month. This, combined with the sheer volume of work that often needs to be accomplished in a single board meeting, means that it can be challenging to build relationships between board members. Chair Robert Hutchins supposes that infrequent contact between board members can contribute to a lack of appreciation or understanding for the local challenges each member faces. He observed,

When you don't see each other on a regular basis – when you don't build that relationship – there's a lack of understanding, a lack of appreciation and a growth of cynicism or misunderstanding. That's so different from the municipalities, where we see each other on a very regular basis and are working together on the same projects.



It is important, he concludes, to provide board members with opportunities to build relationships with one another. Over the course of this research, contributors shared a number of stories of going beyond the boardroom to build informal relationships between board members. Several CAOs, for instance, routinely schedule board dinners after information sessions or workshops. One CAO shared how providing a meal after an information session or workshop can help people relax and discuss presentations made by senior management.

If we're going into a budget workshop and we know it's going to be a hard grind where difficult decisions will need to be made, we'll set up a work grouping. We'll stage it so that there are high-level presentations in the late afternoon by our leadership or senior management team, and then we'll have a break and a meal...People start to relax, and they start to talk about the presentations made by the senior management team.

The emphasis on providing a break and a “sit-down” meal highlights the role of the group meal as one of community and connection. Another CAO highlights how members often relax and small talk with one another during and after a meal:

We will provide a nice dinner... As [board members] sit around the room, they tend to small talk. You may have Directors who aren't necessarily sitting beside each other at the board table, but they'll sit beside each other at the round table. It just helps so much.

Ultimately, sharing food in a casual situation can provide board members with an opportunity to get to know one another better and discuss everything from grandkids to new recreation centre in their municipality. As RD CAO Janis Bell puts it,

[Board members] will find common ground in a casual situation that they might not necessarily find when dealing with issues at the table.

In other words, providing an opportunity for members to converse informally can uncover common ground and promote relationship building “across the board”.

5.2.3 Strategies to build relationships between municipal and Regional District staff

Contributors agreed that relationships built on trust between RD and municipal staff – particularly RD CAOs and municipal CAOs – can greatly increase the likelihood of collaboration and positive outcomes when it comes time to make decisions at a board table. Trust facilitates effective knowledge transfer by making it easier for staff of all levels to share information with their RD or municipal counterparts. In some cases, lack of trust can result in reluctance for staff in both RD and municipal contexts to share information with one another. CAO Warren Jones



explained that some people worry that sharing information will undermine their local or regional interests:

As a RD CAO, I should not have a fear that a city manager will be doing something that undermines the staff at the RD. At the same time, a city manager should not worry that I will be doing something that will undermine their staff.

Several CAOs shared stories of how engaging with their municipal counterparts in an early and ongoing way can streamline decision-making at the board table and create policies that balance local and regional interests. CAO Debra Oakman shared a story that highlighted the positive impact of trust between municipal and regional CAOs:

A few weeks ago, a CAO at a municipality phoned me up and said he wanted to talk to me about a particular issue. He explained what he would introduce to his council, and how he expected his RD Director would raise the issue at the RD board. The next board meeting, the Director raised the issue and was struggling a bit. Having the background knowledge from the municipal CAO, I was able to assist the Director....My respect for this CAO increased and I felt I was able to be more effective for the RD Director at the board table.

This story illustrates how building trusting relationships where information can be shared openly and honestly can help craft policies and programs that respond to both local and regional interests.

Looking to the Literature

Interest-based negotiation (IBN) is a process that helps to identify common interests in the attempt to create mutually beneficial, “win-win” solutions to disputes or conflict.

What is an “interest”?

An interest is the underlying need, desire, concern, fear or hope. They are the “fundamental and motivating objectives” that inform the positions an individual takes in a negotiation (Chicanot & Sloan, 2011).

What is a “position”?

A position is an ideal outcome imagined by a negotiator. Unlike interests, which can be numerous, revealing and inclusive, positions are singular, prescriptive and exclusive.

Readers looking for more information on IBN can look to *Getting to Yes* (Fisher & Ury, 1991) and *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution* (Mayer, 2000), as well as the extended bibliography at the end of this paper.

There are a number of strategies that can help build trust between RD and municipal staff. Some participants suggested that it is important, for instance, to schedule regular meetings between RD and municipal CAOs. The frequency of these meetings depends largely on context; some RD CAOs meet with their municipal counterparts monthly, while others meet quarterly or on an as-needed basis. Both Chairs and CAOs agreed that RD CAOs also have a

significant responsibility to collaborate one-on-one with municipal CAOs or city managers in order to reach consensus on regional issues. One Chair explained,

If you have trouble, and politicians can't agree, the first thing you do is get your CAO to talk to the city manager [of the dissenting municipality] to try and craft a potential solution.

This demonstrates the importance of RD and municipal staff relationships and the essential role staff can play in helping to bridge differences. Some participants added that having interest-based discussions with municipalities is an indispensable part of the process of collaboration. Having conversations built on identifying common interests helps create solutions that harmonize local and regional objectives. It is also worth noting that *where* these conversations are held can make a difference; several RD CAOs regularly meet municipal CAOs outside of the RD offices. Meeting in a neutral environment, such as a city park or a café, can help diffuse perceived power imbalances. One CAO explained,

Building some relationships is best done outside of the office entirely. I meet city managers across the Regional District; we go to lunch, or walk in a regional park, or I visit their city hall. I hope this helps emphasize that I want to understand their local interests; hosting people in a fancy RD boardroom doesn't necessarily get this across.

Contributors agreed that an existing level of trust means that collaboration between RD and municipal CAOs is far more likely. In more urban Regional Districts, it can be equally valuable to have senior RD and municipal staff from departments like engineering or parks and recreation to meet on a regular basis. While phone calls and emails are important conduits for interim communication, participants agreed that trust is best built during regular in-person encounters. Regular meetings can also

Looking to the Literature

There are a variety of skills and tools that help parties move towards resolution. One powerful tool *detoxification reframing*, or changing the verbal presentation of an idea, concern, statement or proposal so the essential interests are still intact but unproductive language, accusation and aggression is removed (Mayer, 2000, p. 134). This helps people tell more positive and productive stories that lead to resolution. An example may be:

Frame: This is yet another example of how this board completely disregards what's best for my community!

Reframe: You are concerned that the board does not fully understand the unique needs of your community, and are worried of the impact this could have on those you represent.

Readers looking to learn more about communication skills may look to foundational books like *Taking the War Out of Our Words: The Art of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication* (Ellison, 2002), *Messages: the Communications Skills Book* (McKay, Davis & Fanning, 1995) and *Conflict Management: A Communication Skills Approach* (Borisoff & Victor, 1998).



facilitate knowledge transfer, collaboration and solutions that balance regional and local interests.

Summary

This chapter has explored the importance of trust in relationships between staff and board members, between board members and between RD and municipal staffs. Contributors agreed that trust facilitates information sharing and knowledge transfer between RD staff and RD board members, collaboration between board members and transparency between RDs and member municipalities. A few strategies for building trust in the unique RD context have been highlighted, ranging from the benefits of regular, well-rehearsed RD staff presentations to the board, to the value of “sit-down” meals between board members, to the importance of communicating openly with municipal staff.

5.3 Strong Information Sharing Practices

Regional Districts are faced with complex tasks ranging from developing a new solid waste management plan to implementing a regional growth strategy. Strong information sharing practices are necessary not only to mobilize the technical knowledge to develop a viable plan, but to ensure that the plan is fair, equitable and serves all service partners. Given the high workload of elected officials and staff, ensuring the right information is shared at the right time is not an easy task. There are often cases of *information asymmetry*, where information is unequally or incompletely shared between stakeholders. Contributors to this research agreed that strong information sharing practices are a crucial ingredient to creating a RD environment that can effectively prevent conflict escalation and address negative conflict. Major ways to create these practices fell into three broad categories. First, early and ongoing communication is a critical part of ensuring the right information is shared. Second, there must be opportunities for both elected officials and staff to discuss complex issues and identify what information they still need to access. Finally, access to the information describing the historical context and rationale of previous decisions can ensure the original spirit of the initiative or service arrangement is not lost when staff members or elected officials leave the Regional District.

Looking to the Literature

Information asymmetry exists when a “party or parties possess greater informational awareness pertinent to effective participation in a given situation relative to other participating parties” (Clarkson, Jacobsen & Batcheller, 2007). Recent research done at the University of Michigan School of Information highlights the negative consequences of information asymmetry for both information “rich” and information “poor” parties in decision-making. Information “rich” parties that unilaterally problem-solve usually miss critical insight into the problem, while information “poor” parties do not have the tools to contextualize their more context-specific issues in the larger organizational landscape.

5.3.1 Strategies to ensure early and ongoing communication

Contributors agreed that information should be shared through early and ongoing communication between staff and elected officials at the RD level. This can take several forms. Several Regional Districts, for instance, organize regular meetings between municipal and Regional District CAOs. The objective of these meetings is not only to pass on information, but to provide municipal CAOs with opportunity to ask questions, voice concerns and offer input on everything from a budget, to a capital project, to a regional or sub-regional service. RD CAO Brian Reardon explained,



It's really important – and it's something I've been doing for probably eight years now – to schedule meetings on a regular basis. Subject to there being issues and availability, a quarterly basis is optimal. I like to set up a meeting on a day that does not coincide with a council meeting, and I like to have every one of the CAOs commit. Municipal staffs have the opportunity to ask very direct questions and I make sure, as the [RD] CAO, that they get very direct answers.

The early and ongoing nature of these conversations can have a direct impact on the success of projects in the future. Former RD CAO Paul Macklem put it succinctly:

Success is more likely when municipal senior staff are consulted and kept apprised of a situation and of the issues that affect them; particularly those that have a significant financial impact.

Several Chairs and CAOs echoed Macklem and Reardon and emphasized the importance of providing direct and timely answers to municipal staff questions. Many also cautioned against always framing the RD as “information rich”, or the party providing information to others. Regional District staff need to develop a wide-angle understanding of regional issues, but can only do so if key information is provided openly and directly by municipal staff on local perspectives, issues and challenges. In cases like the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) where there are large numbers of specialized municipal staff that can provide information, additional RD-municipal staff forums called “regional advisory committees” have been a useful strategy. These monthly forums bring specialized staff like engineers or planners together to provide local expertise and insight into significant regional issues.

Early and ongoing communication extends, of course, beyond senior administrative staff. The GVRD keeps its numerous member municipalities up to speed through Council-to-Council forums. Three times a year, elected officials from across the RD are invited to attend a morning workshop where senior RD staff and subject matter experts speak to a number of regional projects, services or initiatives. These forums are supplemented by monthly email updates from the RD Chair to elected officials and senior staff from across the region, further supporting communication and information sharing. Chair Moore explains the goal of these newsletters and forums:

We're always promoting our cities. We know what our crime rate is, the density of our city and its livability. We can easily get on soapboxes and tell you how great our community is. But it's not as easy to do that for a Regional District. So, we provide statistics like, “We clean a billion litres of water a day” or “We have nine million people that go to our regional parks each year”. Statistics like this let people be really proud of what we do in Metro, and help us come together as 22 large cities.



While many RDs have neither the municipal membership nor the staff capacity necessary to organize Council-to-Council forums, nearly all face a similar challenge of providing the right kind of information to their municipal and electoral area members. Several board Chairs choose to schedule their time in RD offices around committee meetings to ensure that they are available to discuss issues and ideas with committee members on an as-needed, informal basis. Other Chairs make points of meeting with every council in the region on an annual basis. One explained,

We wanted to hear from them what was working well, what wasn't working well and what we could do better. So that was a big commitment, a big conversation. Some were done informally, while others were at formal council meetings depending on how the council wanted to host us.

In sum, meeting regularly with councils is an important piece both in sharing information, and in ensuring the Regional District is responsive to the needs of its members.

Contributors agreed that information sharing does not stop with budgets, capital projects or services. Many added that all board members benefit from learning about the greater history of the RD and about their particular roles and responsibilities as RD board members. A lack of understanding of these roles and responsibilities can lead to conflict between electoral area and municipal board members who may be unsure of, or have an inaccurate understanding of Directors' roles and responsibilities. Resources including the *Regional District Toolkit* (2005) and the *Regional District Primer* (2006) are accessible guides designed to help in this work.

5.3.2 Strategies to ensure opportunities to discuss complex issues

Effectively sharing information involves a two-way conversation. Participants agreed that information seminars and forums are important catalysts for discussing complex issues that impact the region. For CAO Debra Oakman, this often means scheduling time for board members to think about a decision after the information is presented. She reflected,

We operate under the three principles of good decision making for the board...giving them information in the form of staff reports, consultant's reports and presentations, but then also giving them a chance to discuss and a chance to reflect on the information. So, often we'll take forward complicated matters and they won't make a decision at that particular board table. They might ask for more and we'll come back. It can be an ongoing process dependent on how complicated the matter is.

This type of exchange ensures that all the information necessary to make a confident decision is available. A number of CAOs and Chairs observed that having information seminars involving

presentations by subject matter experts and senior RD staff can help RD boards tackle complex or difficult issues. These seminars, which are held prior to the board or committee meeting, are open to the public but there are no resolutions or decisions made; they are an opportunity for board members to learn, ask questions and seek clarity before coming to the board table.

Both CAOs and Chairs observed that proactively providing as much relevant information as possible before a contentious issue, budget or initiative is brought to the board table could prevent misunderstanding and the spread of misinformation and promote better outcomes. Some added that creating connections between RD board members and RD staff is crucial to ensuring that board members can have questions answered before they come to a committee table. In the words of one Chair,

It's about creating that connection so that the director – not feels comfortable... most politicians feel comfortable speaking to anyone – but who knows who the right person to call is so they can actually have a conversation beforehand and not at the committee table where they waste half of the people's time.

Providing the opportunity for questions to be answered outside of the boardroom can result in more focused and efficient meetings.

5.3.3 Strategies to ensure access to the history of previous decisions

Ensuring the continuity of knowledge is a challenge for many organizations where issues are complex and context-dependent and turnover in Board membership quite frequent due to the nature of election cycles. In a Regional District context, agreements like service arrangements endure beyond the careers of the individuals that crafted them. Often, there are not accessible and detailed records that describe how and why a service was arranged, or why it has changed over time. This can lead to the formation of new services or reviews of current ones due to a lack of understanding of the history and rationale for the service. CAO Brian Reardon commented,

It's been my experience if a new service is initiated, it's because the players have changed. The service may have evolved, willingly or unwillingly, through staff initiatives. The scope can creep. And then people start asking questions – "Why has this happened? It's not even reflected in the establishment bylaw!"

Service Reviews

Local governments have undertaken regional service reviews in one form or another since the mid 1960s. However, the passage of the *Local Government Statutes Amendment Act* (also known as Bill 14) in the year 2000 introduced a default *legislative* service review process that can be initiated by any participant in a regional service. There are two ways to review a service: a formal (or legislative) review and an informal (or internal) review.

The *Guide to Regional Service Arrangements and Service Reviews* (2001) and *Reaching Agreement on Regional Service Review and Withdrawal Disputes* (2001) are helpful resources for RDs.



Regional Districts faced with these questions often answer them through informal or formal service reviews. Contributors agreed that detailed and descriptive records of service agreements help immeasurably when a service is up for review. During his time at North Okanagan Regional District (RDNO), Reardon designed a systematic way to ensure these records are created. He explained,

Quite often, services are established as a compromise. RDs have a basket of services and when certain municipalities attempt to cherry pick, they don't realize they got into the service twenty years ago because of another consideration. So what I thought would be helpful is a document that says, "Fifteen years ago when this service was established, this was the thinking of the board. This captures the frame of mind."

RDNO ultimately adopted a document template called the *Service Establishment Checklist*. It was designed to record the important details and context behind establishing any regional or sub-regional service and is included below as a helpful model. Any service created with the help of this checklist will have a valuable paper trail when it comes time for review.

Regional Service Checklist (courtesy of RDNO)

- The proposed service has a clear and understood purpose.
- The proposed service has a defined and agreed-upon scope (i.e., range of activities).
- Specific, measurable goals for the service have been identified and can be achieved.
- Progress towards the goal can be measured on a regular basis.
- There is a clear understanding of anticipated (and potential) outcomes.
- A five-year financial plan for the proposed service has been developed.
- The parties agree on a way to share costs.
- The parties agree on how the proposed service should be governed.
- The parties agree on how the proposed service should be delivered, and by whom.
- Potential conflicts or overlaps with existing services have been examined and resolved.
- The parties agree on a process through which to review key aspects of the service (including the continued need for the service).
- Service withdrawal provisions have been clearly laid-out.
- A start-up plan (or transition plan in the event that the proposed service is emerging from an existing municipal, local, sub-regional or regional service) has been developed.

This checklist would be accompanied by a number of appendices detailing how each “check” on the checklist was fulfilled. The important thing is to clearly record the context and rationale behind a service bylaw.



A checklist is not, of course, the only way to ensure clear and detailed records are kept. One CAO has started to ask for written reports, recommendations and bylaw options as opposed to verbal summaries, and explained,

When I started [at my RD], there was so little documentation... so few staff reports that you couldn't figure out the history. So over the years we've refined that report process and anecdotally, on Friday we had this huge issue... and I remember having a discussion with our lawyer and saying, I want a staff report on this; because five years from now, I wanted to make sure we knew what it was we were [advising] the board to do...

Ensuring that there are written records that document the context and rationale behind a decision will ultimately help a solution be more effective in the long term.

Finally, there are potential benefits to compiling the type of information required by a service establishment checklist for older services agreements. One CAO/Chair team observed that retroactively compiling records around contentious issues helps establish a clear set of facts and removes some elements of ambiguity that can fuel disagreement over the relative “fairness” of a service. The CAO explained,

What we've started to do for major issues is...we produce a document based on historical documents going back ten or fifteen years, and get that in front of the board. Then the board collectively can say, “There's not an issue here”. From then on, there is a body of information that says, “We've dealt with it.” We've done that for several major issues.

This quote highlights the twofold power of this strategy. First, it can clarify details of an issue and set the foundation for a service review, if necessary. Second, it ensures that concrete sets of facts are available to all stakeholders. In doing so, it counters some of the rhetoric and misinformation that can be employed by individuals in any organization.

Summary

Ultimately, both elected officials and senior administrators agreed that effectively sharing information is a critical ingredient to an RD environment where people can collaborate through conflict. Elected officials and senior administrators have come up with a variety of ways to share information. Highlights include council-to-council forums, information sessions for RD boards, providing documents on the history of a contentious issue or service, service establishment checklists, monthly newsletters and regular meetings for RD and municipal CAOs.



5.4 Shared Vision

This research has found that developing a common identity as a RD Director, as well as a unifying vision for the region as a whole, is a critical part of developing an organization that efficiently and effectively responds to the needs of its electorate. This section explores how RDs have built and maintained shared visions, as well as ways they have responded to challenges to this unified vision. A brief introduction highlights the importance of developing a shared vision. The strategies to do so are presented as four separate sections. The first section, *Integrate Local Visions*, highlights concrete strategies that have helped establish durable regional visions while maintaining local autonomy. The second section, *Engage in Constant Improvement*, explores how informal and bylaw-based service reviews have helped RDs become responsive and proactive when faced with service-based disputes. The third section, *Develop Regional Awareness*, shares creative ways that RD CAOs and Chairs have fostered regional awareness; a key ingredient to developing a shared regional vision. The fourth section, *Address Difficult Behaviour*, grapples with the issue of difficult or disruptive behaviour at the board table and explores ways to ensure it does not derail RD business.

5.4.1 The Importance of Shared Vision

Regional Districts span diverse geographical and social terrain. For instance, the Cariboo Regional District in central B.C. covers over 80,000 square kilometers of geographically varied territory and includes twelve large electoral areas and four municipalities. On the other hand, the Capital Regional District on southern Vancouver Island has a total land area of only 2,340 square kilometers and includes thirteen municipalities and three electoral areas, all with unique communities with individual needs, interests and objectives.

In this context, harmonizing local needs and objectives with regional interests is no easy task. It requires constant collaboration on the part of members and a commitment that extends beyond one's home municipality or electoral area. Contributors agreed that developing a shared vision among Directors is a challenging, but critical, part of an RD environment that prevents conflict escalation and addresses negative conflict. It acts as a magnetic force that compels members from distinct areas to continue to come together as a regional force to make decisions for mutual benefit. One Chair illustrated this point,

A regional vision is important... There has to be some reason why you come together other than to divide up the pie for your personal benefit. Otherwise you might as well stay at home and send letters to one another!



A regional vision is not distinct or exclusive from a local vision. In fact, contributors agreed that it is critical to maintain local identity even while developing a regional vision. Chair Al Richmond of the Cariboo RD observed,

You need to develop a regional vision and you need to have respect for the fact that some Electoral Area Directors have a vision for their community. The community of an electoral area Director is every bit as important as a municipal community; people are elected for their community values.

Fostering a regional vision is a continuous and complex task. It is challenged by issues ranging from disagreements over fringe area land use to cost sharing for sports complexes. In some cases, Directors are not fully committed to their roles as regional collaborators. One CAO commented,

I've found that around the board table, not all members are fully bought in to being a board Director....some board members don't see RD staff as their own...and they're likely to be polarized when disputes arise between the RD and their municipality.

In order to reduce the likelihood of polarization, it is important to foster a shared regional vision that helps unite Directors representing diverse interests.

5.4.2 Strategies for Integrating Local Visions

Municipalities and electoral areas have distinct visions for their communities. In order for Directors and their communities to commit to a shared vision, it must reflect and respond to, at least in part, their community's needs and interests. Contributors identified strategic planning as one major way this can be accomplished.

The strategic planning process is a common tool in local government and can be used in a multitude of ways in the RD setting. Some RDs create strategic plans for each individual service, while others focus on creating an overarching plan that is revisited annually. Overwhelmingly, contributors agreed that a successful strategic plan must be tailored to the unique context of an RD rather than be adopted from a template; this ensures the end result helps unite members. In the words of one CAO,

That's why the strategic plan is so important – it gives everyone a focus... the same focus. They may disagree with bits and pieces of it but they would have participated in creating it, so there is buy-in to move forward together.



A number of contributors also observed that strategic planning sessions are sometimes one of the only forums where quieter or more reserved Directors can have a formal voice at the board table.

The CAO-Chair leadership team plays a central role in identifying and pursuing issues that can unite the Regional District. CAO Warren Jones has used the strategic planning process as a way to build cohesion:

One of the things we do when we get a new board is we'll go through a strategic planning process... We look around the table and say, what priorities do these people have in common? What interests do they share? This way, you can at least have one or two things that help build a sense of cohesion.

Contributors agreed that if the leadership team can identify and capitalize on these common issues, this can translate into momentum on other issues as well. CAO Brian Reardon explained,

You build on that event [the common issue], and then other possibilities will unfold that were previously unknown to them.

Creating consensus and collaboratively tackling one issue can, in other words, provide the blueprint for collaboration on more thorny or contentious issues.

5.4.3 Strategies that Support Constant Improvement

A key purpose of Regional Districts is to provide a political and administrative framework for inter-municipal, regional and sub-regional services. To be effective over time, service arrangements must be able to respond to the needs of service participants and adjust when local or regional circumstances change. Service reviews, or the process of revisiting and reworking the terms of a service agreement, are the key way that RDs accomplish this task.

Contributors had mixed experiences with service reviews. Several Chairs and CAOs had experienced lengthy, contentious and frustrating statutory review processes. Others had embraced service reviews as a positive tool for change, and provided a number of strategies

Looking to the Literature

Strategic planning is an organization's process of defining its direction and making decisions on allocating resources to pursue this direction. While each strategic plan is unique, a successful one is usually participatory (it involves all significant stakeholders) and resonates, in large part, with the individuals or groups it represents. It usually involves four elements:

1. Vision – what the organization wants to be
2. Mission – the fundamental purpose of the organization
3. Values – beliefs that are shared among stakeholders
4. Strategy/Roadmap – a mixture of the organization's goals and policies it will use to get there

These plans are usually summarized in a document, diagram or presentation that the organization can refer to in times of conflict.



that have helped ensure that the experience promotes the continued success of the Regional District. This section explores how informal and bylaw-based reviews can prevent conflict escalation and address conflict that has already escalated.

Informal Service Reviews

Informal reviews are conducted at the discretion of a Regional District board. They can serve as a forum to discuss and clarify and, if necessary, revisit and renegotiate the scope and terms of a service. Informal service review processes should be tailored to fit the needs of the participating members. There are several valuable insights that can be taken from the informal service review designed by former CAO of Central Okanagan RD (RDCO), Paul Macklem. The process responded to concerns raised by a member municipality over a number of regional and sub-regional services. It can be broken down into five steps:

1. **Create a steering committee & schedule meeting dates.** *This group consisted of an elected official representative from each participating area and invited municipal staff support.*
2. **Create fact sheets.** *RDCO staff created fact sheets for each service under review. They included the mandate of the service, its program management goals, program activities, participating members, the objectives and concerns raised about the service, financial considerations and options for consideration. These sheets were provided to steering committee members 48 hours before the initial meeting.*
3. **First steering committee meeting.** *This meeting was guided by a simple flow chart designed for the purpose (sidebar below). It tackled one service under review at a time and allowed time for questions and discussion. Where decisions could not be made, additional information was requested for the next meeting.*

Looking to the Literature

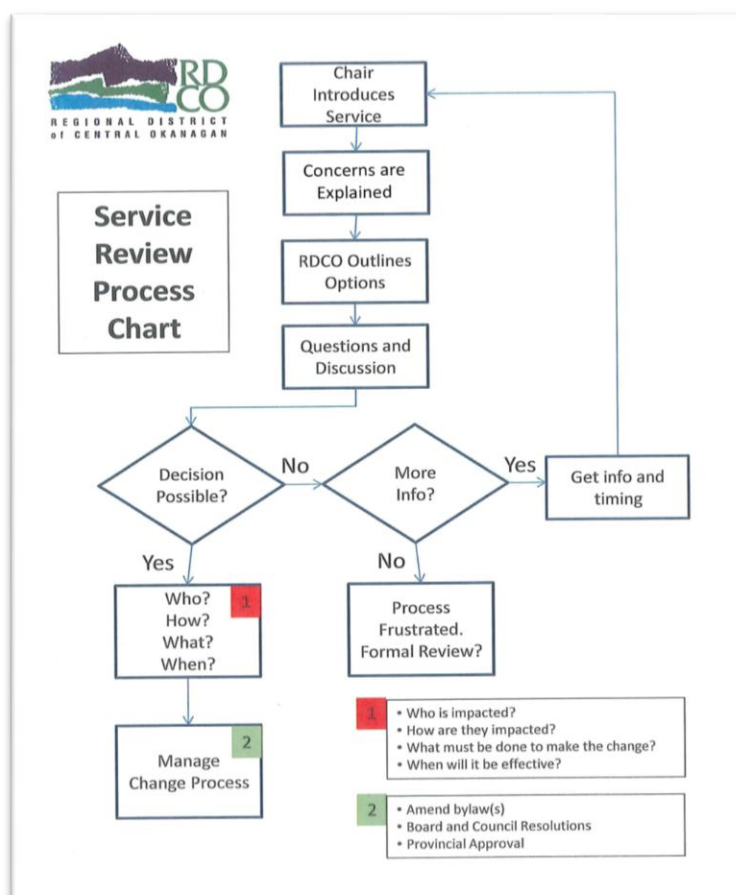
On June 12, 2000, the Province of British Columbia passed Bill 14, the *Local Government Statutes Amendment Act*. Bill 13 featured a package of reforms that directly impacted Regional District governance, including:

- an extension of broad service powers to Regional Districts;
- new provisions to develop flexible service arrangements;
- the opportunity for participants in services to initiate reviews; and
- the ability, in some cases, for participants to withdraw from a service.

Following the passage of Bill 14, the Government of B.C. published a series of guides that explain service arrangements, reviews and withdrawals available at www.cscd.gov.bc.ca. They include:

Guide to Regional Service Arrangements and Service Reviews (2001)
Regional Service Reviews: An Introduction (2001)
Designing Regional Service Arrangements: An Introduction (2001)
Reaching Agreement on Regional Service Review and Withdrawal Disputes (2001).

4. **Second steering committee meeting.** Following a brief refresher of the services under review, committee members developed recommendations for the RDCO board. The service review process chart and a series of updated fact sheets guided this meeting.
5. **Bylaw changes and budget amendments approved by RDCO board.** This final step resulted in changes to the status quo.



The entire informal service review process shared by CAO Paul Macklem lasted only four months, from when the member municipality first brought their concerns to RDCO in November, to when the informal process was developed (February), to when the steering committee met (March-April) and finally made their recommendations to the board (April). Macklem observed that providing fact sheets and a process chart kept discussions as focused as possible. Initiating an informal process rather than a statutory review provided the opportunity to customize the process, voice concerns, problem solve and collaborate. The process can now serve as a blueprint for future informal service reviews.

Bylaw-based Reviews

Like informal reviews, bylaw-based reviews can be designed to address the issue(s) in question. The major difference is that bylaw-based reviews are included in the service establishment bylaw and can supersede statutory review once adopted. In Comox Valley RD (CVRD), bylaw-based reviews are commonplace. CAO Debra Oakman explained why she encourages service reviews in general:

We've kind of taken an embrace to service reviews... because we've had a lot. I don't see it as a negative thing. It sounds kind of corny, but I frame it as "this is great opportunity to look at how we are doing things, and we will learn something." It's all about trying to change that "Oh, my god! We're going to have a service review!" reaction... Organizationally, we should be asking these questions of ourselves on a regular basis.

CVRD completes a number of informal and bylaw-based reviews each year, whether or not a concerned member initiates them. Oakman shared details of one recent bylaw-based review that was written into the service establishment bylaw in 2006. This bylaw merged three separate parks services into one service and provided for a service review. The provision reads,

All aspects of the Electoral Areas 'A', 'B' and 'C' parks and greenways service shall be reviewed every five years, with the first review occurring in 2012. (CVRD Bylaw 2925 § 7)

Oakman added that it is sometimes helpful to phrase the provision as "no later than" so that reviews can be initiated earlier, if necessary. Having regular reviews, she explained, ensures that the services can proactively respond to changing local and regional contexts. She added:

There is a theme of continuous improvement. That's very much why we want to do this – to learn from the past and to avoid conflict.

The theme of continuous improvement is a critical one when discussing service reviews. While statutory reviews serve an important purpose, contributors highlighted the value of informal and bylaw-based reviews as proactive ways to prevent conflict and to respond to tensions around existing service agreements.

Looking to the literature

A RD board can be viewed as a "working group" of independent actors that come together with individual objectives and perspectives. Extensive research exists on common traits of "high-performance" groups, or groups that are effective at achieving remarkable things. Johnson and Johnson (1997) famously identified five elements of high performance groups:

1. Positive interdependence among participants.
2. Individual accountability.
3. Face-to-face interaction.
4. Social and interpersonal skills.
5. Positive group dynamics.

Several of these elements are reflected in these findings. Events like sharing meals increase face-to-face interaction develop social and interpersonal skills. Board retreats emphasize the positive interdependence among board members by exposing them to a range of regional issues.



5.4.4 Strategies that Foster Regional Awareness

There was general consensus among participants that an intimate knowledge of the Regional District is a critical part of engendering a strong regional vision among diverse board members. Recognizing this, Chair Robert Hutchins and CAO Warren Jones of Cowichan Valley RD began to run biannual board retreats during which senior staff, RD board members and key municipal staff from a host municipality spend the entire day together learning about one part of the Regional District. Over the course of the day, the group tours the region by mini bus. Local elected officials acted as “hosts” in their respective regions, taking turns with the microphone and explaining local issues, initiatives and experiences to the rest of the group. On the first retreat, the board got an “incredible taste” for the broader community by seeing a wide range of facilities and initiatives over different parts of their region. Chair Hutchins recounted the following:

On the first retreat, we saw everything from public facilities, to private facilities, to economic development initiatives. We saw the largest greenhouse on Vancouver Island growing peppers, a log pole plant producing the longest poles in British Columbia and a cranberry farm. We saw the new First Nations school, new sports fields, and an arts centre. By the end of the day, we had an incredible taste for the community.

This board retreat gave members an opportunity to learn about the issues, aspirations and goals of other communities in the Regional District. As the next quote illustrates, it provided valuable context for members who may not fully appreciate the unique challenges and opportunities that other communities face.

Often [board members] live forty or fifty kilometers away from one another; they don't see the other communities in the Regional District. They don't know what the issues are, they don't appreciate the issues, aspirations and goals of others until they get out there and see them first hand. So it was extremely valuable that people could see the highlights as well as the challenges for each community...

Learning about other communities and sharing the unique challenges and opportunities of your own can help create a larger regional identity. Chair Hutchins has found that board retreats help create a base of “common knowledge” and understanding that breaks down barriers and difference and ultimately strengthened the board as a whole. He concluded,

We're all in this valley together; we're all in this region together. It's about building a regional sense of community, or a community of communities. When you have a common knowledge, a common understanding, it certainly breaks down barriers and differences.



Chair Al Richmond has used a similar strategy in his region. Twice a year, a different area hosts a “board on the road” meeting. The board has a strategic planning session in the morning while they are travelling, followed by a community barbeque at the host municipality or electoral area, and then a normal board meeting in the afternoon or evening. The community barbeque provides a valuable opportunity for members of the host community to directly engage with their RD Directors and senior staff. Moreover, Chair Richmond explains having the board travelling together across the region helps bring awareness to its sheer size.

We start with a half-day planning session where we talk about goals and objectives. We do that on the road, and that’s helped bring awareness to the vastness of the region...

This awareness can contribute, in turn, to an appreciation for the unique characteristics of the communities across the region. Several contributors also observed that involving senior RD and host municipal staff in these retreats provides both a valuable opportunity for staff to get first-hand experience of the region and also helps to build relationships between staff and board members through shared experience. Chair Hutchins commented,

It’s an incredible learning experience for [staff]. They are key advisors and they provide key recommendations to the board. So being there first hand, together, and seeing the opportunities and challenges in each area is absolutely critical to the best decision-making.

Encouraging senior staff to travel with board members provides opportunities to build relationships between board members and staff through informal conversation and common experience.

5.4.5 Strategies for addressing difficult behaviour

Given the complexity of the issues discussed at Regional District board and committee meetings, and the variety of perspectives involved, it is natural and to be expected that some element of tension or conflict will emerge from time to time. However, how people behave when they disagree can make the difference between the conflict being addressed in a positive way or devolving into harmful or unproductive conflict. Contributors mentioned that when one or two individuals on the Board exhibit what some call “difficult behaviour”, boards must spend excessive amounts of time dealing with the behaviour, which can distract from a meaningful discussion of the issue(s). CAO Warren Jones observed that one or two individuals often cause “critical challenges for the organization”. He reflected,

The thing I find interesting is just how much time we’ve spent today [in the focus group] just talking about ‘rogue’ Directors; I think that’s a real issue. If you look around any board table, there are a few Directors that staff and other Directors spend an inordinate



amount of time trying to deal with. The rest are largely willing to work on conflict. But some people can just cause critical challenges for the organization.

In other words, individuals that take up large amounts of time and energy can be frustrating for many board members willing to “work on conflict” in a collaborative and inclusive way, as well as for senior staff who are charged with responding to their requests. Nearly all contributors echoed this sentiment, acknowledging that the effort required to address difficult behaviour can impact the efficiency of board meetings.

There was overwhelming consensus that some behaviour, alternately called “difficult”, “challenging” or “rogue”, can cause critical challenges. Contributors described a spectrum of behaviour ranging from “talking over” staff or board members (interrupting), to accusing staff of lying or misrepresenting information, to speaking to the media without prior board discussion. Contributors also agreed that difficult behaviour, which is usually context-specific, requires a context-specific response; there is no “one size fits all” solution. Strategies described during focus groups and interviews fell into three main categories: work to identify interests, establish common facts and unite the board.

Work to Identify Interests

The term “interests” is common in dispute resolution literature. In this context, it refers to the key motivators behind any type of behaviour – unlike positions, which assume there is only one solution to a problem, identifying interests leaves the door open for a range of possible responses to any given problem. Several contributors commented that it is often difficult to find out what interests are – or exactly *what* triggers the difficult behaviour in the first place. One CAO described the frustration she sometimes feels when an individual can’t articulate what they are upset about. She explained,

A lot of times, you get a Director who’s really unhappy with another Director or someone we’re doing business with... but you can never figure out why. They can’t articulate [their concerns] and it makes it impossible to solve if they only speak in the abstract.

Helping the individual identify their interests and objectives can, she reflected, speed up the process of actually getting these interests met and arrest the difficult behaviour.

Both CAOs and Chairs agreed that it is helpful to work as a CAO-Chair “leadership team” to identify potential issues early on. Several teams meet regularly before board or committee meetings to discuss potential issues and brainstorm the best way to address these issues before they manifest in public meetings. At times, many meet with the Director before board or committee meetings to hear their concerns, answer questions and initiate staff action. One RD Chair explained,



I have briefings with the staff before every board meeting to find out exactly what went on at all the committee meetings so I can be prepared at the board meeting for what topics might come up, and who might bring them up. Sometimes, it's about chatting with [the Director] before the board meeting... to let them know that their issue is being heard and that we're working on it and that they don't need to make a big [issue] of it at the board.

Many contributors routinely work outside the boardroom to identify and respond to issues that might manifest as difficult behaviour at the board table. It can also be valuable, however, to facilitate a more structured exchange of concerns and ideas at the board table when board members are particularly disputatious. Chair Hutchins offered one strategy worth particular attention. He, with the support of his CAO Warren Jones, introduced a “no-rebuttal round table” session at a regular board meeting. The agenda was dominated by a contentious recreation service that had already proven to be divisive; Chair Hutchins was looking to circumvent the anticipated aggressive, back-and-forth debating that often accompanies disagreements regarding services, budgets, projects or initiatives. This round table was framed by two rules. First, every board member has an opportunity to state their position and explain how the service in question will impact the region and / or their electorate. Second, no member can rebut someone else's statement – when it is their turn, they must speak only to their personal perspective. In Chair Hutchins' words,

This ensures that members have an opportunity to state their position without fear of someone saying, “Oh, Director so-and-so's point is totally erroneous”.

He added,

It was actually extremely worthwhile because before a motion was put on the table, everybody had a chance to express their views, their values, and their vision... it just took the tension out of the room.

In his experience, it also expedited the process of bringing something to resolution, raised board members' awareness of local interests and helped clarify the objectives of the group as a whole. Speaking about a no-rebuttal round table held before a contentious budget vote, he explained:

Before we started – we went round table and let people speak to their principles and their concerns – issues that are in the budget, what should be in the budget, percentage increases – so that it was all aired before we actually started. It took over an hour that time, but we were actually able to expedite the budget process later on.



He added,

It was an airing of ideas, an airing of positions without falling into the adversarial role that comes with debate. It just allowed people to voice their own views without trying to rebut someone else. It turned out to be very powerful and the feedback I got from directors was positive: “Great process,” “Really appreciated that,” “Really appreciated the time to hear other points of view before we got into the debate.” It was healthier. I found it to be healthier.

No-rebuttal round tables have the added benefit of restricting the air time of board members that tend to dominate normal debates; quieter members often have valid and important contributions that are disregarded or not included.

Establish common facts

The importance of keeping detailed and descriptive records of service arrangements was described in the previous section, *Information Sharing*. The process of retroactively compiling information on contentious topics to establish a common set of facts was described as a way to prevent the spread of misinformation. It has also been used to directly respond to individuals that consistently challenge a service or program with little grounds.

Looking to the Literature

The power of voicing personal views in an organized group setting has been studied extensively by conflict theorists and dispute resolution practitioners. While not identical, the “no-rebuttal round table” process has several similarities to a “circle process” in which participants have equal opportunity to voice their personal stories (concerns, values, interests, objectives) sequentially and without interruption.

Readers looking to learn more about circle processes as a way to restore relationships and break deadlock or stalemates should review the following resources:

Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (2002)

Kay Pranis, *The Little Book of Circle Processes: A new/old approach to peacemaking* (2005)

The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource on Today's Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems, eds. Holman, Devane & Cady (2007)

Some contributors agreed if the difficult behaviour stems from unease over the relative fairness of a service or program, establishing a common set of facts can be an effective response and can help clarify and address underlying concerns. Moreover, establishing common facts can unite and strengthen the understanding of all members of the board.

Unite the Board

Elected officials and administrators alike agreed that the responsibility to manage difficult behaviour is often best left to the Regional District board as a whole. Chair Al Richmond commented,

No matter how good the Chair is, they will not solve the problem on their own. It's a team effort.

Chair Richmond went on to describe how a united board can set the tone for a board meeting:

When you're chairing a meeting and suddenly hands start to go up and say, "Excuse me, Mr. Chair, but this is totally out of order" then that sets the tone instead of the Chair routinely trying to say, "You're out of order! You can't do this!"

Contributors discussed a number of ways to ensure the board collectively agrees on how to behave during meetings. One common tool was introducing a code of conduct. For some, a code of conduct offered a useful, neutral reference point for addressing difficult behaviour.

For others, it has been of limited use as the member(s) exhibiting the difficult behaviour chose not to sign the code of conduct or abide by it. A few things were present in instances where codes of conduct worked well at preventing and responding to disrespectful behaviour. For example, if the code of conduct was a new addition to the RD and was created with significant input from directors, it was more likely that it would be accepted and respected; it helps if directors have a sense of authorship. In the case of long-standing codes, there were usually provisions in the code to ensure it is read and adopted by any new board members. An excerpt from the Cariboo Regional District (CRD) code of conduct explains how the RD ensures new board members are "brought on board":

Discussion: Codes of Conduct

Codes of conduct in an RD setting are purely voluntary. Unlike codes of conduct used in medicine, counseling or scientific research, there are no disciplinary processes to use if someone disregards the code. As such, it is important to generate buy-in for a code of conduct from the ground up.

There are a number of common elements to successful codes of conduct in RD settings, including:

1. The code is created with significant input from directors;
2. There are provisions to ensure that new directors read and adopt the code;
3. Directors are identified as the main enforcers of the code;
4. The code includes concrete definitions of what constitutes respectful behaviour between directors, staff and members of the public.



... The Code of Conduct and Ethics will be provided to candidates for Regional District elections. Persons elected to the Regional District will be requested to sign the Director's Statement affirming they have read and understand the Regional District's Code of Conduct and Ethics. The Code of Conduct and Ethics will be reviewed in detail at orientation sessions for new and returning Directors following each election or by-election. (CRD § 20)

This provision ensures that board members are familiar with the code, its requirements and its importance to the functioning of the RD. Successful codes also include provisions saying that Directors are the main enforcers of the code. An excerpt from the same code of ethics and conduct from CRD reads:

The Regional District's Code of Conduct and Ethics is intended to be self-enforcing. Directors should view the Code as a set of guidelines that express collectively the standards of conduct expected of them. It, therefore, becomes most effective when Directors are thoroughly familiar with the Code and embrace its provisions. (CRD § 20).

Including these provisions ensures that expectations on behaviour and decorum are clear. Finally, there are often concrete instructions for how to behave respectfully during a board meeting. A final excerpt from CRD's code of conduct and ethics illustrates how this can be done:

Directors shall treat with respect the Chair, colleagues, staff and members of the public present during Board meetings or other Regional District proceedings. They shall not interrupt other speakers, make personal comments or comments not germane to the business of the body, or otherwise disturb a meeting. Meetings shall provide an environment for transparent and healthy debate on matters requiring deliberation by the Board. (CRD § 5)

This provision, which clearly identifies interruptions and personal comments as unwelcome in an RD setting, can be cited when responding to difficult behaviour.



Summary

Fostering a shared vision among Directors can be an elusive goal in an RD setting where directors, both from electoral areas and member municipalities, are charged with representing distinct community interests and objectives. However, this research has found that a common vision is a critical ingredient to an RD environment that can prevent conflict escalation and respond to conflict that has escalated. This section has highlighted four major ways that RDs have successfully developed a regional vision. First, they integrate local visions through strategic planning processes. Second, they engage in constant improvement through informal and bylaw-based service reviews. Third, they develop regional awareness through board retreats or field trips. Fourth and finally, they respond to Directors' difficult behaviour by identifying interests, establishing common facts and by uniting the board.

6.0 Recommendations

The main objective of this research project has been to explore how Regional Districts prevent, address and resolve the various types of conflict that occur in their organizations. Specifically, it has captured the stories, reflections and observations of elected officials and senior administrators who work to proactively address and resolve conflict in their own Regional Districts. By mobilizing the wisdom “within the system”, this report aims to help build Regional District capacity to prevent and address conflict by providing a variety of tools, skills and processes to use when faced with conflict. As such, the main project deliverable is situated in *Findings*. The following recommendations are best understood as a range of conclusions that can be drawn from this research. They are purposively broad in scope and are intended as general reference points; local government elected officials and administrators are best situated to determine how each recommendation may relate to their unique RD environment. Readers looking for specific strategies are encouraged to revisit *Findings*.

6.1 Look beyond the immediate conflict

This report has highlighted a range of strategies that can support proactively addressing and resolving conflict. It has found that trusting relationships, strong information sharing practices and a shared vision are critical ingredients to a RD environment that can collaborate in the face of the tension that often goes hand in hand with competing interests, limited resources and complex issues. These themes are interdependent; the relative strength and weakness of one influences the strength and weakness of the others. As such, a recommended “point of departure” in both preventing and resolving conflict is to look beyond the immediate conflict to the larger RD environment. Findings suggest that identifying and addressing the weaker links – a lack of accessible information, for instance – can help develop more difficult themes like trusting relationships. This, in turn, helps to build overall organizational capacity to collaborate through conflict.

6.2 Make relationship building an organizational priority

In the words of one participant, “It’s all about relationships”. This research makes a case that trusting relationships between RD staff and RD Directors, between RD Directors themselves, and between municipal and RD staff are indispensable to an RD environment that prevents and addresses conflict. In times of fiscal restraint, processes supporting relationship building are often seen as dispensable. This research suggests that they should remain an organizational priority. Integrating processes that support relationship building ensure that when contentious issues emerge and conflict arises, that the communication lines, trust and respect are in place to ensure the conflict is functional and can result in creative change and collaborative solutions.

6.3 Provide Experiential Learning Opportunities

When experiential learning opportunities were provided to Directors, participants reported significant gains in group cohesion and shared vision. These are two important ingredients to an environment that can prevent and address conflict. In many cases, this meant going beyond boardroom debates over local priorities to physically travelling the length and width of the region as a group. The common experience and understanding fostered by travelling the region, in the words of one board Chair, “breaks down barriers and differences.” This research suggests that RDs can benefit from providing board members and senior staff with a “taste for the region” that only comes from smelling, hearing and feeling the wide range of opportunities and challenges faced by each locality.

6.4 Continue to explore the potential of bylaw-based and informal service reviews

Service provision is a major function of Regional Districts and a common source for conflict. This research has found that proactively designing service establishment bylaws to include regular by-law based reviews and having an established process for informal reviews at the request of service partners has helped foster a culture of continuous improvement within some RDs. The findings suggest that RDs can benefit from embracing service reviews as part of routine business.

6.5 Prioritize in-person meetings

It is often easy to forgo in-person meetings in favour of more time-efficient and cost-effective alternatives such as conference calls, email chains, video conferencing and online training seminars. While the aforementioned are valuable tools, this research has found that they must be balanced with significant face-to-face contact. Participants emphasized the positive impact of regular in-person meetings between RD CAOs and their municipal counterparts, between RD Chairs and mayors, between RD CAOs and Chairs, between senior RD staff and Directors, and between the CAO-Chair leadership team and RD Directors. This research suggests that regular in-person meetings helps to identify issues that need to be proactively addressed, cultivates trust, builds common ground on regional issues and negates the spread of misinformation that feeds conflict.

6.6 Continue to harness the knowledge within the system

At the conclusion of both focus groups, both RD Chairs and CAOs commented on the value of discussing conflict with their peers from other RDs. The strategies shared in this report represent only a fraction of the innovation, creativity and passion many individuals bring to their work in regional governance. This research indicates that those from *within* the system are best situated to advise and help their peers endeavoring to prevent and address conflict. The Union of B.C. Municipalities, the Local Government Management Association and the



Ministry of Community, Sport and Cultural Development provide a range of more formal opportunities for those within the RD system to connect and learn from one another. This research suggests that there is significant value in continuing to provide and attend in-person peer learning events such as focus groups, nuts-and-bolts sessions and RD-specific conferences like the RD CAO/CEO Forum.

6.7 Explore applications for local governments across British Columbia

This report has specifically explored conflict and collaboration in British Columbia's Regional Districts. The findings, however, may have applications to the broader local government system. For example, BC municipalities may be similarly challenged by competing interests, limited resources and complex issues. This may occur at both the intra-municipal and inter-municipal level. It is possible that skills, tools and processes similar to those that help Regional Districts prevent and address conflict may apply to the larger local government sphere.

7.0 Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Report

Regional District members must cooperate across jurisdictions in order to address the regional issues of our time. While conflict is a natural product of multiple parties gathering to discuss complex issues, prolonged conflict can seriously impede a Regional District's ability to solve public problems. An awareness of this, combined with an appreciation of the knowledge within the Regional District system, prompted this research project. This report has responded to the research questions by describing a range of tried-and-true strategies used by RD Directors and senior administrators. It has delved into the three critical elements to a Regional District environment that facilitates the prevention and positive resolution of conflict: trusting relationships, strong information sharing practices and a shared regional vision. Finally, it has concluded with a short series of recommendations that Regional Districts may consider when looking to build local capacity to prevent and resolve conflict.

7.2 Looking Forward

There is much to be said for the old idiom, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure". The research findings have made a compelling argument for the importance of *organizational culture* in both preventing *and* addressing conflict. Contributors did not provide a list of quick fixes; they described Regional District cultures that prompt members to respond to conflict in productive, rather than destructive, ways. Creating such a culture is difficult. It is not easy to quantitatively measure success; gains are usually qualitative, context-driven and difficult to guarantee. This can make it difficult to maintain an organizational commitment to creating the type of culture described in *Findings* and encouraged in *Recommendations*. However, in light of the complexity of regional public issues and the assured existence of conflict in the RD sphere, it is an important investment to make.



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