GUIDE TO BUILDING DIALOGUES ON HORIZONTALITY:
DISCUSSION PAPER

Environment Canada and the Synthesis Workshop on Horizontality
for the
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Action-Research Roundtable on the Management of Horizontal Issues

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Preface

This *Guide to Building Dialogues on Horizontality* has been composed for the Overview Satellite on Horizontality, in support of CCMD's Roundtable on the Management of Horizontal Initiatives.

This guide will be of benefit to managers wanting to enter a dialogue on the topic of horizontality with their team. It does not provide new tools or techniques, but brings together established communication tools that can be helpful for generating dialogues on any topic. It does this by focusing on building dialogues around case studies--hypothetical or real examples of situations that demonstrate a particular point. The case study approach is a very specific, but very powerful, learning tool.

This document can also help you move forward with the Roundtable's flagship product, *Moving from the Heroic to the Everyday: Lessons Learned from Managing Horizontal Projects.* It can do this by helping you to generate a dialogue around horizontal management issues in general, as well as to focus on the specific dimensions of horizontal management, such as mobilizing teams and network and developing a shared framework, as outlined in this flagship report.

Overall, we hope this document proves to be a useful tool for persons wanting to enter a dialogue on horizontal management with their colleagues and partners.

What is horizontality? Why is it important?

Public organizations are increasingly dependent on each other to fulfill their primary roles and responsibilities. Policy goals, such as environmental renewal or the promotion of economic prosperity, cut across departmental boundaries more than ever before. When citizens access public services, they expect service delivery from a single point of access. Moreover, ideas and innovations are a growing source of value within our knowledge-based society. Sharing ideas and innovations between organizations is one of the best ways to ensure continual improvement in public services.

The building of communication and collaboration relationships across organizational boundaries — otherwise known as "horizontal management" or "horizontality" — is a vital part of a public manager's responsibilities. The objective is to create a coordinated and optimal division of labour between teams, departments, regional branches, and occupational functions. And managers are now being held personally accountable for the achievement of this objective.

Managing horizontally is a particularly daunting challenge because it requires special interpersonal and leadership abilities, an organizational culture of trust, on-going communication, and careful planning. Not all of these things can be acquired overnight, nor do they all fall within the direct control of a single individual.

In light of these developments, many public sector managers ask themselves: "How can I build bridges between organizations and forge new partnerships? How do I build and sustain mutually fulfilling work relationships with other public managers?" Public managers have relatively little guidance about how to answer these questions. In fact, most managers are offered few clues even about how to get started.

Building a dialogue is an important first step

The starting point is actually not far from reach. It is the building of dialogues among colleagues about how to actively seek out and implement new horizontal relationships. This raises the obvious question: So, what exactly is meant by "dialogue" and how does one go about building one?

As William Isaacs points out, a dialogue is "a shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together. It is not something you do *to* another person. It is something you do *with* people . . . Dialogue is a living experience of inquiry *within* and *between* people."[1] A dialogue is not about coming to decisions by using debate to beat others into submission, nor is it a formal process of polite diplomacy and negotiation. It is a candid conversation involving the respectful exchange of ideas, the suspension of knee-

jerk judgements, and — above all — careful listening. To borrow Isaacs' phrase, dialogue is a "conversation with a center, not sides."[2]

This method of interacting with and engaging others is useful for many reasons. The virtues of dialogue include the ability to

- bring people with different experiences, ideas, expertise, and roles together, place them on an equal footing, and solve problems jointly;

- identify and scrutinize deeply held assumptions, preconceptions, and received wisdom;

- break down pretensions, dissolve social rituals that build walls between people, and disrupt unproductive routines;

- come to collective judgements and, in so doing, generate trust and a shared commitment to act jointly; and,

- build the credibility and persuasiveness of those engaged in dialogue.

When applying the dialogue method to building horizontal relationships, it is important to have a focus. Dialogues do not involve setting a rigid agenda. On the contrary, dialogues are made productive by directing participants' attention on the analysis of a specific case study — an approach known as "case-based dialogues."

Case studies are a means of relating (often complicated) material in an accessible, illustrative and compelling way. Discussion of case studies breaks down dry monologues and, instead, allows groups to offer interpretations and ideas about how to make improvements. This method also offers a more empirically sound basis with which to understand what it takes to build and manage horizontal relationships.

How this guide will help you build case-based dialogues

So what makes this guide a worthwhile investment of your valuable time? It will give you enough tips and insights to conduct effective dialogues on horizontality case studies, including precise information about how discussions are orchestrated, how case studies can be used, and the key horizontality issues that should be discussed. In short, this guide will act as a road map for managers interested in improving the way their organizations operate.

There is more involved than simply following a series of steps. Actually, those who attempt to build meaningful dialogues with colleagues may be confronted by pessimism

and cynicism. What is required of you is an on-going commitment to engage others in dialogue and build on the lessons learned from this guide. As added help, this guide will draw readers' attention to several other resources for learning more about the competencies required.

The guide is organized into three main sections. The first section talks about the logistical issues involved in organizing a dialogue, and includes information about who should be involved, what should be discussed, when dialogues should be conducted, and how long they should last. The second section looks at the role of case studies, and includes a description of the main components of a case study, useful tips, and key questions that should be asked during discussion. The third section looks specifically at how dialogues and case studies can be applied in the analysis of important horizontality issues.

How to organize a discussion on horizontality

While there is no single, best way to conduct a dialogue, there are several good practices and guidelines that managers may draw from. As managers and their teams become more familiar with the dialogue method, they are encouraged to improvise and build on the lessons discussed here. In the meantime, there are four key sets of issues that dialogue leaders should consider: when and where to hold a dialogue; how the dialogue is best conducted; how to deal with dialogues that have stalled; and what should result from the dialogue process. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

When and where to hold a dialogue

When and where should managers hold a dialogue on horizontality? As the saying goes: there's no better time than the present. In other words, managers create their own opportunities to engage others and they should therefore remain vigilant.

This said, there are several things to consider when deciding the best time and place to hold a dialogue. Consideration should be given to the stage a team's actual horizontal relationship building activities have reached. For example, case-based dialogues can

- be used early in a horizontal project to achieve conceptual clarity and learn about ways of getting started;

- help keep a horizontal project on track by providing methodological tips and alerting a team to common pitfalls; and

- be part of an evaluation process, where teams reflect on their own horizontality efforts by looking at the lessons others have learned.

Managers should be sensitive to the time of day and amount of time a team has to devote to dialogue. A team's workload, energy levels, and schedule flexibility are important factors to consider. This does not mean that managers should wait until their team has free time on their hands. All office environments are busy places and managers will always have to work within constraints. The issue here is selecting the dialogue format that fits within these time, energy and place constraints. Options[3] include:

1. *Early morning "wake-up sessions"* — It is often possible to set time aside at the beginning of the day when minds are fresh and less encumbered by the nagging telephone calls and e-mails.

2. *"Brown bag" lunches* — When a team has a particularly busy workday, it is often convenient to conduct a lunchtime dialogue, where team members bring their own lunches or the team leader has the session catered.

3. *The weekly team or staff meeting* — Teams often meet at a time in the week where schedules are less frantic in order to touch base with fellow team members. This is an ideal opportunity to incorporate dialogue into a weekly evaluation of activities.

4. *The occasional workout* — More intensive dialogue sessions can be part of a one- or two-day workshop designed to build a team's capabilities.

5. *The special retreat* — Teams may conduct special retreats out of the office in order to get away from workplace distractions. Dialogues can be held at various times during the retreat.

Managers may find they have to experiment in order to determine the best times and places that fit the preferences and predispositions of team members.

How to conduct the dialogue

Dialogues are best conducted in an environment where participants are afforded the freedom to speak candidly. They need to dispel their fears and feel comfortable contributing. It is important that dialogue not be focused on any one individual but rather on the subject matter. The group's moderator may choose to be highly active in the conversation or simply act as a facilitator — in either case, this role should be clarified at the beginning of the process.

There are several questions that dialogue leaders frequently ask:

1.	*How many people should be included?* — Deciding how many people to involve in a dialogue involves striking a tricky balance between, on the one hand, having enough people to generate a lively discussion with a variety of opinions expressed and, on the other hand, not having too many people so that everyone will have an opportunity to contribute. Striking this balance often depends on the characteristics of the group members. As a rule of thumb, dialogues work best with no fewer than four and no more than 10 people. If necessary, a manager can hold several dialogue sessions in order to handle larger numbers of participants.

2.	*How long should the dialogue last?* — The duration of a dialogue session may sometimes be determined by scheduling constraints. The dialogue should last long enough for the case study to be explored in sufficient detail. Yet, it should not be so long that participants are repeating themselves, their attention spans decrease, and restlessness sets in. As a general rule, 45 minutes should be a minimum duration; one that requires effective moderation on the part of the dialogue leader. On the other hand, an hour and a half should be the upper limit for a productive and time-efficient dialogue. If the group is particularly engaged or there are many issues that need to be explored in detail, then longer dialogues may be appropriate. In such instances, however, it is important to schedule breaks to allow individuals to "recharge their batteries."

3.	*Who should participate?* — It is tempting to suggest that only those actively involved in horizontal relationship building be included in the process. This would be wrong, however. It is important to build the competencies of all public servants, since everyone is likely to operate horizontally at several times during their career. There are always opportunities to span boundaries. Moreover, it is not always possible to foresee who in an organization will be asked to contribute to a particular horizontality project. For this reason, the dialogue process should be open to all who are willing to participate in good faith.

4.	*What information should participants have?* — Participants come to a dialogue with different knowledge, skills and abilities. They also come with different levels of familiarity with horizontality and the case material to be studied. In order to place all participants on an equal footing, it is important that they be afforded access to the same sets of material. They should be given written information as a reference about the case studies to be discussed. They should be given the rules and norms of the dialogue process. And they should be provided with information that

they can use to explore a case study further after the dialogue is over. Participants should not be given homework in preparation for a dialogue unless there is some assurance that the materials distributed will be read in advance.

5. *Where should a dialogue be held?* — Dialogues should be held in a quiet environment free of distractions and interruptions. Most meeting rooms are suitable, although participants may not want to sit around a table while discussing an issue. Sometimes a circle of chairs provides a more suitable environment. To avoid distractions, the dialogue may be held outside a work site. That has the added benefit of disrupting old meeting habits, such as favoured seating arrangements. One last thing: make sure that cellphones and other devices that may interrupt the flow of conversation are turned off.

6. *What rules need to be stipulated?* — In order to generate an open dialogue, participants need to be told that their exchanges must be respectful and not intended to intimidate or wound. Basic ground rules, such as not dismissing other people's views or impolite interruptions, should be discussed at the beginning of the dialogue. Participants' expected roles should be stated explicitly at the outset.

These tips should help promote a thoughtful and productive dialogue. The goal should be to have an inquisitive and exploratory process, with the dialogue leader making artful and strategic interventions to guide members of the group. The dialogue should not be a tightly controlled discussion where ideas are simply ratified.

How to deal with a stalled dialogue

From time to time, even well-moderated dialogues among individuals with good interpersonal dynamics will stall. The dialogue may become repetitive, people may feel they have nothing to contribute, or unproductive conflicts will break out. It is important to understand that such pitfalls are common and are often remedied by some very simple actions.

The common pitfalls experienced in dialogues include[4]:

1. *Unproductive advocacy* — Advocacy is a useful and necessary element to any dialogue. However, members may become carried away by remaining steadfast in their position, not maintaining an open mind and, thus, not fully considering the input of others. In such instances, it may be useful to play a game in which individuals are compelled to defend a position they have opposed. Moderators and group members

may also identify and scrutinize underlying assumptions of an advocate in order to encourage greater tentativeness.

2. *Unproductive inquiry* — Individuals often ask questions when they have an answer in mind, or disguise statements as questions. They may also avoid contributing to a group by asking questions, or simply attribute their own views to those of others prematurely. These are all forms of unproductive inquiry that can be avoided by making use of better phrases, such as: "What am I not seeing here?" or "Help me to understand your question?" or "How do you see this?"

3. *Ritualistic behaviour* — Groups will often lapse into familiar and comfortable routines, or take on favoured roles. This can result in dialogues that are not very insightful. Often, the remedy is to put people in unfamiliar situations where they feel compelled to improvise. Even small changes to the environment, such as seating arrangements or the type of room a dialogue is held in, can change the way people relate to each other.

4. *An inability to reach closure* — Groups may "sit on the fence," unable to come to a collective judgement. Dialogues may also go in circles, or people may resign from the dialogue by "agreeing to disagree." These are all cases of an inability to reach closure and produce results. This can often be dealt with by stipulating a set of deliverables or objectives that members must work towards. Creating a list of "actionable" proposals can be one such deliverable.

5. *Poor conversational dynamics* — As David Kantor points out,[5] without people willing to make a move or voice their opinions, a dialogue will lack direction. Without opponents, there is no scrutiny or correction. Without followers, there is no completion. And without detached bystanders, few alternative perspectives are available and there is no one to ask "What is missing here?" The combination of all four roles creates the best conversational dynamics. Thus, moderators should act to fill the roles that are missing in the group.

These are just a few of the pitfalls faced in the course of a dialogue. Moderators will find that each group is different and that they must sometimes be inventive in the use of interventions. One thing is certain: practice helps improve technique and participation.

What should be the result?

The end result of a dialogue will often depend on the horizontality challenges faced by a particular organization. Ideally, dialogues do more than simply inform and sensitize participants to horizontality. Dialogues should be "generative" insofar as they create a shared understanding of basic issues, promote camaraderie and trust, and motivate participants to actively build horizontal relationships.

Dialogues should also provide at least three additional, more specific outcomes:

1.   *A list of key lessons learned* — The group should have some basic tabulation or recognition of the key lessons learned. There needs to be some analysis of the similarities and differences between the case studied and the organization at hand. This includes lessons about the challenges faced, obstacles and barriers encountered, and solutions adopted. It is useful to have large sheets of paper available to record key lessons.

2.   *A set of tangible actions* — The group should come up with a set of tangible recommendations about how to improve the management of horizontal arrangements. The recommendations should involve things that participants can act on themselves, instead of creating a lengthy wish list.

3.   *A commitment to further dialogue* — Deliberations should be revisited as new information and experiences come to light. Secure a commitment from participants to take part in additional dialogues.

These results can then be shared and built upon with others in subsequent dialogue sessions.

Using the case study methodology

Case studies are useful as research devices and teaching tools. They are widely recognized as empirically rigorous means of gathering information about initiatives and distilling the key lessons learned. Since horizontal management is a relatively new field of inquiry, case studies also provide a wealth of insights not available through other means. As well, they are easy to discuss within a dialogue because it is easy to relate to them. They involve telling stories about how people similar to you have faced horizontality challenges and dealt with them in a constructive fashion.

However, developing case studies can be a time-consuming activity that, if not done properly, can confuse more than clarify. There are several things that can be done to make case study development easier and more fulfilling.

The main elements of a case study

Exploration of a case study works best if the case description is concise, precise, and follows a logical and readable format. It is possible to construct a basic template of key elements that need to be included:

1.   *Problématique* — There should be a concise statement at the beginning that describes three things. First, it should clearly identify the horizontality initiative at hand. Second, the mandate and mission of the initiative should be spelled out, including the key objectives. Third, readers should be provided with information about the nature of the challenge faced in the case study.

2.   *Description of participants* — The participants involved in the initiative should be identified, described in terms of basic characteristics, and situated within the larger scheme of things.

3.   *Chronology of relationship development* — The horizontal relationships that have developed should be described, both in terms of their historical evolution and key contextual factors. Case authors should ask themselves how the relationships can evolve and if they can be characterized as specific stages of development. Also, what contextual factors were necessary at each stage for the relationship building process to proceed.

4.   *Evaluation* — Accomplishments or lack thereof should be listed. The factors contributing to success should be identified and described, as should those that impeded success (such as obstacles and barriers faced).

5.   *Conclusions* — A summary of key lessons learned and the tentative recommendations should be included at the end.

Several things can be done to improve the presentation of a case study for discussion purposes. Use this template to create a lively story:

1.   *The careful use of language* — The case study should be described in plain language with minimal jargon, buzzwords or elaborate terminology. Be consistent in the use of terms and concepts. Maintain consistent story elements when more than one case study is being explored.

2.   *Good story narratives improve understanding* — Storytelling is one of the best ways of relating case study materials to a group, particularly if they are unfamiliar with some of the subject matter. This requires a clearly identifiable narrative thread (i.e., story line) that informs them about who was involved, what sequence of events took place, and what were the consequences of the actions.

3.   *Clearly labelled sections* — Participants should be able to identify the main elements of the case study quickly; section headings help in scanning the narrative. Extraneous material should be removed or left to an annex.

4.   *Case study presentation* — Each participant should be given a printed copy of the case study materials. The presentation should be brief. Evidence suggests that attention span wanes after 15 minutes unless significantly different subject matter is presented. The actual presentation can take many forms and use several different media (e.g., overhead or electronic slides). It is important that the presentation not be too formal or rigid so that participants can retain some measure of control over the pace and rhythm of the session.

Questions that should guide the exploration of a case study

As participants review the case study material, they will likely have questions and request clarifications. For this reason, it is important to have someone who is fully familiar with the case available to answer such queries. However, the dialogue that follows the presentation of the case should be more inquisitive. Participants need to scrutinize the case actively and to apply the lessons learned to their own situation.

There are several specific questions on the topic of horizontality that dialogue leaders may choose to ask the group:

- Why was the horizontality approach adopted in this case? Was it to solve jurisdictional disputes, pool resources, or extend capabilities?

- What would you have done differently? What could those within the case study have done to accomplish more? How could they enhance successes and overcome obstacles better?

- What information is missing from the case description that could help participants conduct a more thorough assessment? How could the case description and analysis be improved? What assumptions are made by the author, and are they appropriate?

- What key issues (e.g., leadership, accountability) were encountered within the case? Were these issues dealt with effectively within the case?

- What lessons can be applied to the participants' organization? What lessons are not applicable and why? What common experiences are involved?

- How do interpretations of the case study differ between dialogue participants? What are the different perspectives and opinions? Is there any common ground?

These questions will help managers have a clear focus and obtain useful results in conducting the dialogue.

Including key horizontality issues

There are several issues of strategic importance involved in the design and implementation of horizontality initiatives. These broad issues — or themes — consistently emerge within horizontality case studies. It is important for dialogue participants to be aware of these issues and relate the case study material (as well as their own experiences) to them. The issues include:

1. *Process and strategic planning* — Dialogue participants should ask themselves what procedural issues promoted or hindered horizontality initiatives. For example, to what extent did an inclusive and participatory process promote horizontality? How was the initiative planned, evaluated and results reported? How did the parties involved generate a shared vision and motivate joint action?

2. *Credibility, culture and trust* — How important was it to develop a culture of trust and collegiality? How was this accomplished? What steps were taken by the participants to ensure credibility? Were there political issues (such as turf battles) that undermined horizontality? To what attitudes and values did the parties ascribe?

3. *Communication* — What communications arrangements were set up to facilitate coordination and dialogue? Was information shared to its full potential and everyone kept informed? How were expectations and discussions managed?

4. *Leadership* — What leadership qualities were demonstrated by the parties involved? Which stakeholders were committed to the process and what motivated them? Who demonstrated exemplary leadership and at what stages of the process was this leadership most decisive?

5. *Resources* — What resources were required to implement the horizontality initiative? What kinds of support were required? How were the participants able to secure the resources and utilize the sources of support?

6. *Accountability* — Who was accountable for what during the initiative? To what extent were both individual and collective activities appropriately rewarded? How were senior officials appraised of the things that were accomplished by the horizontality initiative?

These questions should be asked about the cases studied, as well as about any horizontality activities in which dialogue participants become engaged. The answers provide a fuller picture of the factors that are necessary in building horizontal relationships.

How you can help promote horizontality

This guide has attempted to provide an introduction to creating case-based dialogues on horizontality. Remember that success will ultimately depend on the skill and innovation that you bring to the implementation of dialogues. The guide represents just one step in an ongoing process of building new leadership competencies. As such, it is up to you to seek improvements in technique and share those with others.

We are also interested in learning about your experiences and having you participate in future horizontality events. A questionnaire has been attached to the guide to gather this feedback. For more information about horizontality and other management priorities, please visit our Web site at **www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca**.

Feedback Questionnaire

Did you conduct a case-based dialogue on horizontality
after reading this guide   Yes: _____   No: _____

If not, what prevented you from conducting a dialogue on   _____
horizontality?   _____
_____

If you did conduct a dialogue, please fill out the rest of the questions listed below.

How many dialogue sessions were held?   _____

How many case studies were discussed in total?   _____

What was the average length of your dialogue sessions?   _____ (minutes)

On average, how many people were involved in your
dialogue sessions?   _____

What did you find most useful about this guide?   _____
_____
_____

What aspect of this guide could use improvement?   _____
(List any specific suggestions you may have.)   _____
_____

What aspects of the dialogue method did you find most   _____
useful?   _____
_____

What aspects of the case study method did you find most _____
useful?   _____
_____

On a scale of 1 to 10, rate how satisfied you are with the
advice offered in this guide (1 means not satisfied at all
and 10 means highly satisfied).   _____

In the case studies you looked at, what factors contributed _____
to the success of the horizontality initiative?   _____
_____

In the case studies you looked at, what factors hindered   _____
the success of the horizontality initiative?   _____
_____

Notes

1   William N. Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (New York: Currency, 1999), p. 9.

2   Ibid., p. 19.

3   Some of the following options are drawn from, or inspired by, the following guide: The Leadership Network, *Dialogue on Values and Ethics: A Practical Guide* (Ottawa: Canada Communications Group, 1998), pp. 3–4.

4   This list draws heavily from William N. Isaacs, "Dialogues, Mental Models, and Team Learning." Course Package, Core Competencies Program (Society for Organizational Learning, 2000), pp. 17–18.

5   Ibid.