



## WHAT IS A SITUATION ASSESSMENT?

A situation assessment is a recommended best practice first step in exploring the potential for collaborative solutions to an issue of mutual concern—i.e., a shared problem, challenge, or opportunity. Typically conducted by a facilitator or other neutral third-party professional, a situation assessment consists of background research and in-depth confidential interviews with a diverse range of key stakeholders. Situation assessments play a number of roles:

### **Bringing clarity to complex issues.**

The confidential assessment process helps neutral party assessors understand the history and context of the issue of mutual concern and related challenges; identify key affected parties and their predominant interests; highlight areas of agreement and disagreement; explore opportunities and challenges for collaborative problem solving; identify key paths forward for better addressing the issue; and make unbiased recommendations for action based on this comprehensive understanding of the issue and related dynamics.

### **Providing opportunities for voices to be heard.**

Assessment interviews provide those with a stake in an issue an opportunity to share their perspectives and concerns. Often, this opportunity for involved parties to fully share their perspectives and “be heard” by a neutral party goes a long way, in and of itself, toward resolving conflict and advancing collaborative problem solving.

### **Helping to build mutual understanding.**

The findings of a situation assessment are typically summarized in a report or a briefing that shares the key takeaways from interviews and background research impartially and without attribution. The report can act as a “boundary object,” helping to create mutual understanding about the issue of mutual concern, who should be involved in addressing it and how, key challenges and opportunities, and priority next steps.



## WHEN MIGHT A SITUATION ASSESSMENT BE USEFUL?

Assessments can often benefit situations in which:



Issues cannot be solved by one party working alone, but rather require participation and commitments from others to ensure successful resolution;



Implementing solutions will involve concerted and coordinated efforts by many parties over time;



Issues are characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence; and/or



Issues are defined by multiple sets of facts or lack a clear and agreed-upon common information base.

**Wallace Stegner Center Environmental Dispute Resolution Program**

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## POTENTIAL REASONS FOR CONDUCTING A SITUATION ASSESSMENT

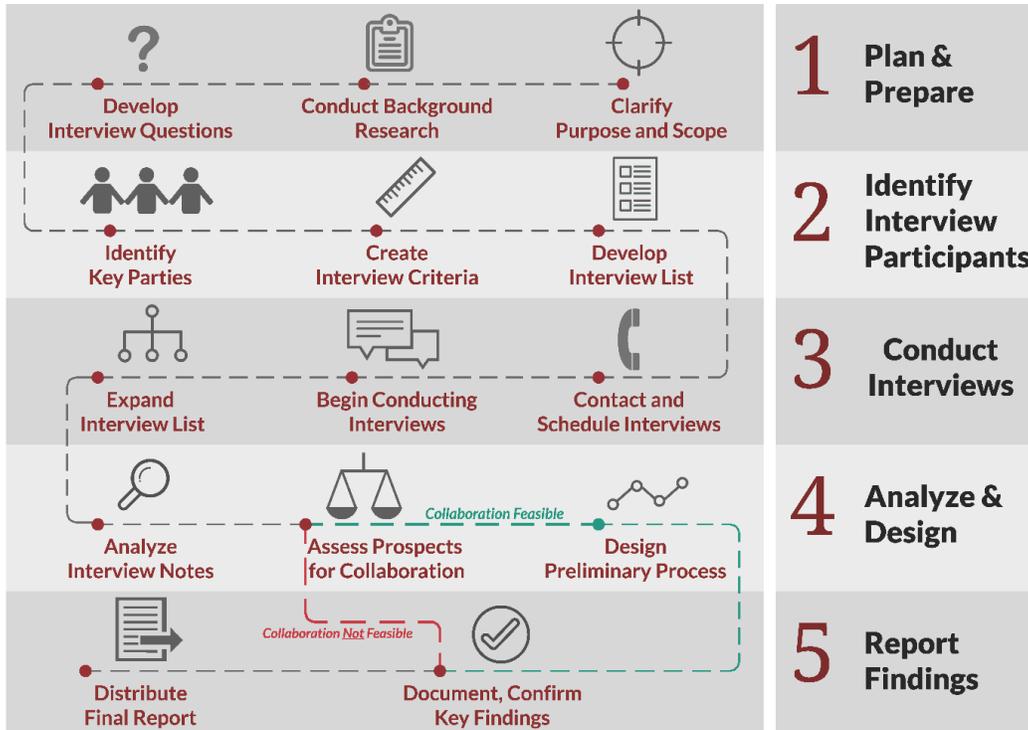
- To better understand the circumstances and relationship dynamics related to an issue of mutual concern
- To identify key stakeholders involved with the issue of mutual concern and their interests
- To identify areas of agreement and disagreement related to an issue of mutual concern
- To assess opportunities and capacity for collaboration around an issue of mutual concern
- To help surface creative and innovative strategies for addressing the issue of mutual concern
- To assist stakeholders in developing shared understanding about an issue of mutual concern, key opportunities and challenges, and priority next steps
- To allow a third-party neutral to develop trust with stakeholders

## POTENTIAL RISKS OF NOT CONDUCTING A SITUATION ASSESSMENT

- The problem-solving process takes longer, costs more, and/or is ineffective due to lack of appropriate process design
- Collaborative solutions are not reached because stakeholders do not trust each other and/or the process, or because key sources of conflict are not addressed
- Progress on the issue is inhibited because not all key stakeholders (including those with power to authorize, fund, block, or stall decisions and actions) are involved
- The problem-solving process is not effectively designed to help stakeholders generate innovative solutions and co-create mutual gains solutions
- Lack of shared understanding and/or assumptions about the issue of mutual concern preclude collaborative problem solving

## HOW IS A SITUATION ASSESSMENT CONDUCTED?

The William D. Ruckelshaus Center developed the graphic below to show the typical steps and stages in a situation assessment. Assessments should be conducted by neutral third parties whenever possible to ensure affected parties can openly and honestly share their perspectives.



Stages and steps of a situation assessment. Designed by Amanda Murphy, The William D. Ruckelshaus Center.

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