

A DISTRICT CONSERVATIONIST'S GUIDE TO DEVELOPING SUCCESSFUL RELATIONS WITH THE CONSERVATION DISTRICT BOARD OF DIRECTORS

This guide describes various principles and techniques which will help the district conservationist in developing and maintaining successful working relations with the CD board of directors. The purpose of this guide is to help NRCS employees build upon the experiences and knowledge of others who, through trial and error, learned how to work effectively with CD boards.

The principles and techniques of interpersonal relations described in this guide will also be helpful when working with the NRCS/CD office staff, other agency personnel, cooperators, and the general public.

A. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. Develop and maintain a positive mental attitude. Let the CD board know that you care and want to help them conserve and improve their district's soil, water, and related natural resources.
2. Develop and maintain your credibility. Be sincere, honest, and dependable. Develop a trust between yourself and the board. Develop and demonstrate a genuine interest in the general welfare of the directors and co-workers, as a friend and not just a business interest.
3. Present facts and discuss opportunities, services, and programs available to the CD board to help them solve their district's resource needs.
4. Develop, maintain, and provide sound technical and management assistance to the CD board, district cooperators, CD staff, and others. Use common sense and good public relations skills when working with the board, NRCS/CD co-workers, and the public.
5. Always present yourself and act in a professional manner.
6. Develop good listening skills.
7. As a district conservationist you work for the USDA-NRCS. It is very important, however, to remember that we work with and through CDs in providing NRCS programs and technical assistance to the public.

B. DISTRICT CONSERVATIONIST ASSISTANCE TO THE CD BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The following actions, when implemented on a routine and continuing basis, will help the district conservationist develop and maintain effective working relations with the CD board of directors.

1. Develop an amiable working relationship and rapport with each member of the CD board. Make periodic visits to their farm or place of business to discuss current topics of interest. Solicit their views on what needs to be done to enhance the soil and water conservation activities and accomplishments in the CD. Face-to-face contact is best; use telephone contact for follow-up discussions.
2. Assist the CD board with program development by providing resource inventory data and evaluations and suggesting ways to accelerate the conservation accomplishments of the district.
3. Encourage and assist the CD directors to evaluate the soil, water, and related resource needs of the district; to establish priorities; and to develop specific goals and actions needed to address these resource needs.
4. Provide information to help CD directors be well informed conservationists and directors. Provide quality, pertinent information. Don't overwhelm them.
5. Remember that the CD Board Meeting is the CD directors meeting. You are attending as a resource person representing NRCS and USDA. Your role is to provide technical advice and counsel

to the CD Board of Directors.

6. Assist the CD chairperson and staff in developing an agenda prior to the board meeting to ensure a businesslike meeting that addresses pertinent conservation issues. Prior to the meeting, brief the CD Board Chairperson on issues involving NRCS.
7. At CD board meetings, report on NRCS activities and keep directors informed of programs, issues, trends, and current policies affecting agriculture, USDA, NRCS, and CD activities.
8. Assist the CD in developing and implementing an annual plan of work and long range plan, especially on items involving NRCS assistance. Make full use of all conservation programs available from USDA, NRCS, and other federal, state, and local agencies and organizations that will help solve local resource problems.
9. Assist the CD with information activities (tours, displays, meetings, news releases, etc.) to develop a public awareness of conservation needs and solutions to these resource opportunities.
10. Continuously promote soil, water, and related natural resources conservation planning and application in personal contacts with CD directors, cooperators, landowners, farm organizations, and others.
11. Be receptive to CD Directors concerns and criticism. When concerns are expressed, identify specific problems, evaluate causes, discuss options for improvement, and take positive action to correct the problem and resolve the concern. Then, follow-up with the CD directors to make sure their concerns have been satisfactorily addressed.

C. SUGGESTED “DON’T’S” FOR ALL NRCS EMPLOYEES

- DON’T express biased, personal opinions.
- DON’T pressure people into making decisions and don’t make decisions for them.
- DON’T continually criticize, condemn, or complain. Don’t be critical of USDA and NRCS policy to CD boards and employees. Work for desired improvements within NRCS.
- DON’T be negative ..be positive!

D. SUGGESTED “DO’S” FOR ALL NRCS EMPLOYEES

- **DO** be positive!
- **DO** provide accurate resource facts and alternatives to the CD board. Explain opportunities and options available.
- **DO** maintain your credibility and, therefore, the credibility of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. If you do not know an answer to a question, say, “I don’t know, but I’ll find out,” then get the answer and follow-up with the person who asked the question.
- **DO** give recognition and thanks to NRCS/CD co-workers, CD directors, and others who help the CD/NRCS team get conservation on the land.
- **DO** guide decision-makers to a logical conservation decision.
- **DO** develop and maintain good working relations with CD directors, co-workers, and others with whom you come in contact in the performance of your duties. Help build the conservation team and be a team player.
- **DO** try and understand a situation from another person’s point of view. Be aware of how your own biases and perceptions affect your thoughts and actions.
- **DO** provide helpful, competent technical assistance to CD cooperators and other assisted by NRCS.
- **DO** give developing and maintaining effective working relations a high priority.
- **DO** control your temper. Let good humor lighten appropriate situations.
- **DO** stay physically and mentally fit and healthy.
- **DO** provide the highest quality assistance to every customer, the first time –every time.

“THE FIRST 100 DAYS AS A NEW DISTRICT CONSERVATIONIST”

(Adapted from information prepared by John J. Eckes, former State Conservationist, Illinois.)

Becoming a district conservationist (DC) at a new location brings many new responsibilities, challenges, and opportunities that can lead to a very rewarding experience, because it is at the field office that NRCS delivers nearly all the assistance we have to offer to the customer, (i.e., the public).

Public relations is one of the responsibilities critical to the success and effectiveness of a DC. **The job of the DC is far more than providing technical expertise.** Remember a DC's effectiveness depends on how well he or she works with and through people. This includes individuals, groups, and communities.

One of the first things a new DC must realize as you begin this job is that it is up to you to go to key people, not wait for them to contact you. You, as the new DC, have much to gain and learn at this point in time.

Listed below are some of the very important people and organizations a new DC should contact at the individual's home, farm, or place of business soon after entering on duty:

1. Conservation district board members.
2. FSA county executive director, RD county supervisor, and University Extension officials.
3. FSA county committee members.
4. Tribal Governments.
5. County commissioners, county road commissioner, county auditor, county drain commissioners, and county health department.
6. Newspaper editors and key staff reporters.
7. Radio and television station managers.
8. Local chamber of commerce.
9. All vocational agriculture instructors.
10. Planning commission executive directors for cities, townships, and county.
11. Farm organization presidents such as Farm Bureau, Farmers Union, Grange, etc.
12. DNR, DEQ, and MDA field personnel.
13. Banks (farm or agriculture representative).
14. County agricultural organizations (i.e. Corn Growers Association, Cattleman's Association, etc.).
15. U.S. Congressman's local representative.

At first this may seem like an overwhelming job, but keep in mind that your first contact may be a very brief get acquainted stop. If possible, take an item of business with you, and remember to leave your name and phone number.

The MOST IMPORTANT step after each contact is to list his/her name, phone number, and address in a readily accessible place for you and the office staff. Follow-up is now the KEY to getting these important people on the “conservation team.” As information comes along in various forms that might be of interest to them, pass it along by phone, mail, or a personal contact.

Last, but not least, encourage the **CD** board to routinely invite outside guests to their board meetings. It is good teambuilding for the **CD** to invite the agencies that the CD and NRCS work closely with, especially those covered by the USDA/CD memorandum of understanding, to their monthly meetings.

Summary: If the job of public relations is handled properly, your success is almost guaranteed. This effort will pay off in building a strong conservation team with solid support for a comprehensive soil and water conservation program that is actively solving the resource needs of the conservation district.