Planning Your Interdisciplinary Meeting

3: Reaching agreement on paths forward
The team re-engages and begins the process of moving from individual understandings or conceptualizations ("mental models") of the research problem to a team consensus. Individual members recognize then share their mental models of the problem. Extensive and often facilitated discussion the diverse models helps reveal tacit and explicit knowledge that each member brings to the table. And it readies the group for moving beyond one model (e.g., the leaders) or just "linking" understandings (e.g., as in multidisciplinary research) to the development of an integrative team model.

Prepare the team for re-engagement
- Open the morning semi-socially e.g., group sharing about restaurants, asking members to share funny/failed/great experiences with team activities in the past, etc. Humor helps start the day
- Remind team of project motivation, the variety of skills across the team, and thoughts expressed the prior day on shared outcomes
- Allow brief time for any comments or requests to discuss something from the prior day
- Introduce goals for the day and allow team to revisit the agenda and make revisions if needed

Eliciting individual mental models
- Pass out poster size sheets of paper and crayons/markers and ask participants to space out so they can work on their own. They can certainly opt to use computers but having hand drawings or textual depictions to post on the wall is useful for later.
- Ask each participant to draw a schematic or conceptual model ("mental model") of the research problem, including its drivers and factors influencing its resolution. This is their conceptualization of the problem/research question (e.g., Is food security threatened by water scarcity-related conflict?) rather than how the project will address the question in order to move forward (that comes later), although the two may be related.
- Ask each participant to now make a list of assumptions that underly their conceptualization
- After 45 min?? to an hour (and perhaps tack on time for a coffee break) re-convene

Recognizing diversity in mental models
- Have each participant present their mental model to the group, allowing team members to ask questions, respond, and/or react.
- Be certain to spend time discussing terms or concepts that come up during the presentations that may need defining or that require discussion of differences in meaning among members
- Make sure a discussion of the assumptions underlying different conceptualizations occurs as well as the commonalities among them
- The end of this session is a good time for lunch or at least a break if not the end of day

Facilitate co-development of a shared mental model
- Allow time for members to reflect on the various mental models
- Guide the group in developing a shared conceptualization of the problem and its desired outcomes based on the day’s earlier discussions

There is a voluminous literature on mental models from a variety of fields