

Board Development

Maximize Your Time and Efforts - Collaborate!

Collaboration, a buzz word of the 90s, has proven to be an effective strategy for organizations looking for ways to:

- Maximize shrinking resources
- Meet increased demands for services
- Reduce overhead costs and maximize volunteer effort
- Make a wider range of services available to users
- Increase the accessibility and effectiveness of services
- Respond to funders' pressure for decreased duplication
- Develop creative ways of overcoming obstacles

In many instances, collaborating organizations have found that, by bringing together different complementary strengths, they can increase the quality of their results, while achieving goals that neither organization could have accomplished alone.

Unfortunately, this level of success has not been everyone's experience. So, before embarking on your first — or next — collaborative effort, take some time to consider the following questions:

- What does collaboration really mean?
- What are the key factors for success in collaborations?
- What are the board's primary responsibilities in facilitating successful collaborations?

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“Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve results that they are more likely to achieve together than alone.

The relationship includes a commitment to:

- *A definition of mutual relationships and goals*
- *A jointly developed structure and shared responsibility for success*
- *Sharing of resources and rewards”*

*Amherst H. Wilder
Foundation*

What Does Collaboration Really Mean?

To better understand collaboration, you may find it helpful to think of a continuum consisting of three C’s: cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. On this continuum, cooperation is the easiest of the relationships for organizations to establish and maintain, requiring little extra effort, and resulting in low risk for the participants.

Cooperative efforts are informal relationships that usually exist without:

- A commonly-defined purpose
- Formal structure
- A systematic planning effort.

When involved in cooperative efforts, organizations:

- Share information only as needed
- Maintain their individual authority
- Control their own resources
- Continue to function independently

Rewards for the effort are focused on the needs of the individual organizations. As a result, there is very little risk involved, and generally there is minimal synergy created between the participating organizations.

Moving along the continuum from cooperation to coordination requires organizations to commit more time, energy, and resources to the relationship. Coordination requires organizations to have:

- compatible missions
- a willingness to establish a more formal relationship

While authority stays with each participating organization, there is a need to set up a coordinating group to establish communication channels, to do some planning, and to divide roles between the players.

All participating organizations make resources available to the coordinating group, and rewards are jointly recognized. With increased integration comes increased commitment, time, and a higher risk of loss of resources and reputation for participating organizations.

(More “Meaning” on the next page!)

Reaching collaboration requires organizations to establish a more lasting and integrated relationship. Organizations move from a limited view of the community, based on their own purpose, values, and goals, to a culture that says:

- We're all in this together
- Success is the collaborative group's success
- Rewards are the group's rewards
- If the collaboration fails, we all share in the responsibility

Thus, collaboration moves organizations from a competitive view of their environment that emphasizes protection and an attitude of *there is only so much to go around*, to an attitude that says *'the more we share, the more there is for all of us.'*

Collaboration means sharing for mutual benefit — space, information, and resources. In this relationship, previously independent organizations come together in a new working relationship that is characterized by full commitment to a mutual purpose. To accomplish this, organizations have to engage in comprehensive planning, establishing well-defined internal and external lines of communication.

The collaborative structure, with approval from the participating organizations, determines what authority it needs to accomplish the purpose. Because of the degree of involvement, the pooling of resources, and the individual reputation contributed by each of the players, the risk factor is higher. However, there is also a greater potential for creating shared products and services that are unique and beyond what any of the partners could do individually.

What are the Key Factors for Success in Collaborations?

Current research shows there are some common factors which help make sure that a collaboration is a success, and that it has a strong possibility of moving organizations from an *'us and them'* approach, to a *'we're in this together'* approach. Six key factors for successful collaborations, described in more detail throughout this section, are:

1. **Internal and external conditions**
2. **Purpose, planning, and progress**
3. **Characteristics of the members**
4. **Structure and process**
5. **Communication**
6. **Resources**

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“A place of realized potential opens itself to change, to contrary opinion, to the mystery of potential, to involvement, to unsettling ideas.”

Max DePree

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(“Questions” continued)

1. Internal and external conditions

Surveying the internal and external conditions of potential collaborating organizations is a good place to start in order to predict long-range success. Before entering into the relationship, ask yourself these important questions:

- Is there a history of successful collaborations in the community and/or among the members of the collaboration?
- Does the general public see a need for, and/or the benefits of, this collaboration?
- Are the organizations ready internally for this collaboration? For example, are the boards receptive to this new way of working? Are staff members open to the collaboration, or do they view their own way of doing things as the best way?
- Do all of the members of the collaboration have something to contribute to, and to gain from the relationship?
- Do the members have positive motives for entering into the relationship? (Do they want to make the relationship work?)
- Does the purpose of the collaboration fit into the strategic directions of the members’ organizations?
- Do the members have long-term goals in which collaboration plays a key role?

If you are unable to answer *yes* to the majority of these questions, your organization may not be ready or able to begin the collaboration process. Without this initial readiness and willingness to embark on a collaboration, the effort will probably fail or, at best, experience minimum success. If these conditions do not exist, consider doing some groundwork to improve the environment for collaboration. A successful cooperative or coordinated project can be the first step in building the foundation for later collaboration.

2. Purpose, planning, and progress

To succeed, collaborating organizations must all agree that there is a need to work together and to blend each organization’s individual vision for the collaboration into a shared vision of success.

(More “Purpose” on the next page!)

“We have to become competent in relationships. Almost no one is going to have the luxury of working alone. All of us are going to be working in ways in which we are interdependent with other people. And the only way we can do that effectively is to build competence in relationships.”

Max DePree

(“Purpose and Planning” continued)

To do this, you first need to take the time to identify shared values and beliefs, and to determine what each organization needs to obtain from the collaboration in order to consider it a success.

From the shared values and vision emerge strategies resulting in concrete, attainable goals and objectives. The goals and objectives must differ in some way from the goals and objectives of the member organizations. You need to monitor these goals and objectives rigorously, making sure that the responsibility for completing each phase of the task is assigned.

Positive, concrete results enhance commitment to a collaboration. Small successes early in the collaboration help to develop a sense of accomplishment that provides the energy needed to take on larger tasks.

Five guidelines to keep in mind when developing your collaborative plan are:

- Avoid being caught up in endless activities and task forces that do not lead to action and progress
- Establish milestones in order to measure progress along the way
- Celebrate your successes often
- Recognize progress towards goals, even the small steps at the beginning
- Take time to reflect and learn so that the collaborative partnership can continue to develop

Questions to consider throughout the collaboration include:

- Have we reviewed our purpose and goals to see if we still agree on where we are going?
- Are the tasks and assignments clear? Do members accept their responsibilities and complete their assignments in a timely and acceptable manner?
- Have we recognized our accomplishments appropriately?
- Have any changes occurred in the internal and/or external environment since we began the collaboration? If so, how do these changes affect the collaboration?

Trust and commitment to the collaboration — and to each other — grow as members meet one another’s positive expectations and learn that they can depend on one another and that they can renegotiate unrealistic expectations.

*“There are three kinds of groups:
Those which make things happen;
those which wait for things to happen;
and those which wonder what happened.”*

Anonymous

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3. Characteristics of the members

The members, individually and organizationally, have a significant impact on collaborations. Effective collaborations require an appropriate cross-section of representatives from the community that the collaboration will affect. Not allowing key stakeholders the opportunity to participate may jeopardize the final outcome of the collaboration.

Participating organizations must believe that this collaboration is in their best interests, and that the benefits outweigh the costs. Unspoken resistance to fully committing to the collaboration occurs when members do not believe in the competency of other participants, or when they perceive the group to be powerless.

Members of the collaboration must believe that no one can accomplish alone what all of them can do together by using their complementary skills and resources. The participating organizations need to value interdependence, and be willing to provide the appropriate time and resources to the project.

It is critical to have the right people from your organization involved in the collaboration. In order to contribute effectively and to keep the collaboration moving forward, these people must:

- be supported,
- have a clear understanding of how the collaboration fits in with your organization, and
- have the skills, knowledge, and appropriate level of authority to make decisions.

Other desirable characteristics include:

- An ability to listen.
- A willingness to consult members of the collaboration.
- Experience and a level of comfort as a team player.

Working together effectively as a group requires members to trust and respect each other. Thus, members behave in ways that support and enhance their mutual trust, not abusing information or undermining each other outside of the meetings. It is vital that group decisions are honoured.

Members also need to respect, and strive to understand, the culture, values, and operational styles of other organizations. To do this, members need to be open to the wisdom found in different perspectives, equally valuing the input of each person. One way to build and nurture trust is to establish, early in the process, ground rules for how people want to work together.

(More “Characteristics” on the next page!)

“We’re still not where we’re going, but we’re still not where we were.”

Natasha Josefowitz

(“Characteristics” continued)

For example, the ground rules might include:

- We will check out our assumptions.
- We will focus on sharing and supporting new ideas, and not evaluate them prematurely.

Be sure to revisit the ground rules on a regular basis to make sure that members are satisfied that the group is honouring the rules.

4. Structure and process

The structure developed by, and the processes used by, the collaborating group need to build commitment to how this group works and the results that it achieves. Within this structure, members need to become both teachers and learners as they move toward the established goal. This means being open to different ways of organizing themselves so that the members can work together effectively.

As the group develops, members clarify roles, their shared responsibilities, and policy guidelines that help them get the work done. The group makes sure that the assignments are clear, and that each member has accepted responsibility to complete specific tasks.

As the collaborating group matures, the relationship moves to a formal status in which responsibilities and decision-making processes are clearly documented. This enables the collaboration to continue beyond the specific people who formed the collaboration. The ability to adapt to changing conditions is a test of the flexibility and strength of the structure and processes of the collaboration.

5. Communication

Members of the collaborating group need to interact regularly and in an open manner — updating one another, discussing issues, sharing all necessary information. In addition to sharing information about their technical expertise and their organization’s goals, members of the group need to share their knowledge of conflict situations, trouble spots, and/or changing situations. This requires open discussion about problems, concerns, and risks associated with membership in the collaboration. If this type of information is not shared with people inside the group, and with other key people in the collaborating organizations, mistrust will build, weakening the entire collaboration.

“Go slowly at first so that you can go faster later.”

Anonymous

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“Collaboration is not always easy. There is a natural tendency, a kind of self-protectionist instinct, to go it alone. If we are truthful with ourselves, however, we must acknowledge that today’s problems are too complex to deal with alone. No one has a monopoly on the best ideas or the best ways of doing things.”

*Fisher, R. & Brown, S.
Getting Together, 1988*

(“Communication” continued)

To facilitate communication, you need to take time to establish both formal and informal communication links. Formal channels of communication need to be agreed upon and written down. To keep information flowing, group members need to stay in contact with each other outside of the formal meetings.

6. Resources

To succeed, collaborating groups require adequate assets to do the job. These assets include human and financial resources. All participants should contribute resources to the collaboration, even though the level of participation may differ, depending on the member’s ability. Besides enabling the collaboration to exist, investing resources demonstrates a tangible commitment to the process and to the other participating organizations.

What are the Board’s Primary Responsibilities in Facilitating Successful Collaborations?

The size and complexity of your organization will help determine your board’s level of involvement in a collaboration. In some organizations, board members may be involved only in developing the desired outcomes for the collaboration, making sure that the collaboration is aligned with the organization’s strategic direction. Staff and volunteers will then carry out the collaboration.

In other organizations, board members may also be involved directly in the collaborating group. In both instances, the board needs to clarify its expectations — for what is and is not acceptable — for the organization in this relationship.

Questions for all boards to clarify before formally entering the collaboration include:

- What are the short-term and the long-term purposes of the collaboration?
- What outcomes must the collaboration achieve in order to satisfy us that the effort has been worthwhile?

(More “Primary Responsibilities” on the next page!)

(“Primary Responsibilities” continued)

- What conditions must be met in order to secure our ongoing support?

- Financial
- Reporting - types and frequency
- Publicity - for example, use of the organization’s logo
- Recognition for the organization
- Levels of planning and approval
- Staff and volunteer resources
- Other

- What is our organization willing to contribute to the collaboration?

- Funding
- Staff and volunteer resources
- Administrative support:
 - Word processing
 - Photocopying
 - Mailing
 - Meeting space
- External networks and contacts
- Reputation
- Other:
 - Mailing
 - Meeting space
- External networks and contacts
- Reputation
- Other

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“If you want to move people, it has to be toward a vision that gets them something they desire. It has to be presented in a compelling way that they feel inspired to follow.”

Martin Luther King

More and more, collaboration is becoming the way to work and to get things done by the organizations in our communities. By taking the necessary time to build plans, relationships, and commitment, your organization can work collaboratively with others to accomplish new achievements. By taking the time to develop effective collaborations, you also maximize the valuable resources of both your organization and your community.

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“The path from competition to collaboration is lighted by negotiation.”

Gene L. Morton

Something to Think About...

Get it in writing

Consider having a commitment letter, signed by someone with a high level of authority, from each organization in the collaboration. By *signing on the dotted line*, the participating organizations demonstrate their full commitment to collaboration. This letter can serve as a reference point throughout the collaboration. Some points to include in this letter are:

- A commitment to the vision, purpose, and goals of the collaboration.
- A promise to participate in the planning and evaluation of the collaboration.
- A description of the resources that are committed to the collaboration, such as staff and/or volunteer time, expertise, funds, and administrative support.
- A statement of what the organization expects to gain by participating in the collaboration.
- The level of authority that the collaborative group member has to act on behalf of his or her organization.
- Recognition of the other members in the collaboration.

Adapted from the *Collaboration Handbook* by
Amherst H. Wilder
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