

# BUILDING AND SUSTAINING EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIONS

## Research Brief

Prepared by Social Entrepreneurs, Inc.

This research brief summarizes findings from 24 studies and reports conducted around the country over the past 15 years regarding what makes collaborations succeed (and fail) and then describes the key strategies that have shown to be effective in sustaining collaborations over time.

### LEVELS OF "COLLABORATION"

There are many ways in which organizations can choose to work together. In "Collaboration Handbook: Creating, Sustaining, and Enjoying the Journey" (Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, 1994), Michael Winer and Karen Ray define a continuum of increasing intensity for building relationships and doing work. The following table summarizes the key distinctions involved.

#### Cooperation

Shorter-term informal relations that exist without any clearly defined mission, structure, or planning effort. Cooperative partners share information only about the subject at hand. Each organization retains authority and keeps resources separate so virtually no risk exists.

#### Coordination

More formal relationships and understanding of missions are evident. People focus their interaction around a specific effort or program, with some planning, division of roles, and communication channels established. While authority still rests with individual organizations, everyone's risk increases. Some resources are made available to the partner organizations and rewards are shared.

#### Collaboration

A more durable and pervasive relationship where participants bring separate organizations into a new structure with full commitment to a common mission. These require comprehensive planning and well-defined communication channels at all levels. The collaborative structure determines authority, and risk is much greater because each partner contributes its resources and reputation. Partners pool or jointly secure the resources, and share the results and rewards.

**Lower intensity**  **Higher intensity**

where "intensity" means risk, time and resources needed, opportunity to make a positive impact, and strength of commitment.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE COLLABORATIONS

The table below summarizes the research findings on the factors that appear to have the greatest influence on the success of collaborative efforts. The factors are grouped into categories, and in each category the factors are ranked according to the number of different studies that noted the factor as being important.

	<i>Number of Studies Noting this Factor</i>
<b>1. Factors Related to PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS</b>	
A. <b>Mutual respect, understanding, and trust.</b> Members of the collaborative respect and trust each other and each other's organizations.	15
B. <b>Representative nature of the group.</b> The group includes members from all parts of the community that will be affected by its activities.	12
C. <b>Members see collaboration as in their self-interest.</b> Members see the cost/benefit of participation – the value of collaboration is worth the effort and risks involved, such as loss of autonomy and “turf.”	7
D. <b>Compatible missions and values.</b> There is congruency between the fundamental missions and organizational cultures/values of the members, or at least the members that must be most actively involved.	4
<b>2. Factors Related to PROCESS/STRUCTURE</b>	
A. <b>Clear decision making guidelines involving all levels.</b> Agreements have been developed and documented that show how decisions will be made within the collaborative. Every level (from Board to front-line staff) within each organization in the collaborative group participates in decision-making so that decisions are not sabotaged.	12
B. <b>Members share a stake in both process and outcome.</b> People have ownership in both the way the group works and the results or product of its work. Process is viewed as important.	8
C. <b>Clear roles and policy guidelines.</b> The collaborating partners clearly understand their roles and responsibilities. Agreements on operating policies have been developed and documented. Each participating organization has a liaison for managing interagency relationships.	8
D. <b>Accountability standards.</b> Clear expectations of performance have been established for each participating organization. Mechanisms exist to ensure accountability to these performance agreements.	6
E. <b>Resource allocation guidelines.</b> Protocols exist to guide how resources (including funding) obtained by or on behalf of the collaboration will be allocated to the participants and managed.	4
F. <b>Means of managing conflict and grievances.</b> Protocols exist to raise and address grievances in a constructive way. Conflicts are managed effectively and channeled into finding useful solutions.	4

- G. **Appropriateness of the collaboration model.** The structure, size, and complexity of the collaboration fits the problem being addressed and the readiness of the participating organizations to work together in a more formal manner. 4
- H. **Flexibility.** The collaborative group remains open to varied ways of organizing itself and accomplishing its work. 4

### 3. Factors Related to COMMUNICATION

- A. **Open and frequent communication.** Collaborative group members interact often, update each other regularly, share information freely and promptly, and openly discuss issues with each other. 14
- B. **Established informal and formal communication links.** Formal communication channels exist so there is a “paper trail” or clear flow of information. At the same time, members establish personal connections so the group is more cohesive and able to function effectively as a team. 8

### 4. Factors Related to PURPOSE

- A. **Specific, attainable goals.** Goals and objectives of the group are clearly defined and can realistically be attained. 9
- B. **Shared vision.** There is a clearly defined problem to address, so there is a compelling reason for the collaboration to exist. Consensus exists around the definition of the need or problem. 6

### 5. Factors Related to RESOURCES

- A. **Sufficient funds.** The collaboration has adequate and stable resources to conduct its activities. 11
- B. **Skilled convener.** The individual who convenes the collaborative group has strong organizing and interpersonal skills, and carries out the role with fairness. 11

### 6. Factors Related to ENVIRONMENT

- A. **History of collaboration or cooperation in the community.** Collaboration is acceptable and encouraged in the community. Some history of success and positive expectations has been developed. 6
- B. **Publicity.** Successes are publicized and acknowledged by the community. 4

There has also been some research into the characteristics of good “collaboration leaders/Chairpersons” and “collaboration coordinators” that may be useful in planning a support structure if one is desired by a particular collaborative group.

Characteristics that have been noted as being important for “collaboration leaders/Chairpersons” are:

- ◆ Ability to guide the group toward the collaboration’s purpose and goals, while seeking to include and explore all points of view.
- ◆ Skilled at consensus building and small group processes.
- ◆ Has respect in the community and knowledge about the issues the collaboration will address.
- ◆ Effective negotiator, able to negotiate “turf” issues.
- ◆ Belief in the process of collaboration.
- ◆ Knowledge about the community and the organizations in the community.
- ◆ Solid oral and written communication skills.
- ◆ Good at problem solving.
- ◆ Flexible, able to provide leadership (help define direction for the collaboration and keep the direction visible) when needed or able to be more of an organizer when needed.
- ◆ Time to commit to leadership.

Characteristics that have been noted as being important for “collaboration coordinators” are:

- ◆ Sensitivity to the affiliates or members of the collaboration.
- ◆ Willingness to work with the collaboration members; able to build good working relationships.
- ◆ Does not desire to make the collaboration “his/her” collaboration, i.e. not territorial.
- ◆ Effective in facilitating the flow of information and communications in general; able to keep agencies informed and up to date on activities and issues.
- ◆ Able to make constructive suggestions and recommendations to the collaboration.
- ◆ Able to be a mediator/negotiator.
- ◆ Excellent facilitation skills.
- ◆ Willingness to carry out the collaboration’s directives and follow established policies.
- ◆ Initiative to do what must be done to accomplish the work; task oriented.

## **STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABILITY OF COLLABORATIONS**

Below are techniques that can help a group of programs or organizations move towards the key features and elements of successful, sustainable collaborations. These strategies can be used within formal, broad based coalitions or can be adapted and utilized for more specific program partnerships.

1. **Understanding Community.** One way to ensure that the collaborative group is representative is create a list of community stakeholders that will be affected by the activities of the collaboration. Traditional family advocates and service providers are critical partners, but it is important to engage other people and institutions that can contribute to programs for children and families. These could include parents; tribal, state, county, and local governments; legislators and their staff; the media; local advocates; law enforcement agencies; the education community; faith communities; health care providers and advocates; senior citizens; community residents; and, of course, the business community. The broader the constituency of the partnership, the broader its appeal is likely to be.

Once a collaborative group is formed, understanding the “community” of people in the group – the interest, cultures, values and habits of the participants – can strengthen the foundation for effective collaboration. This can be done through open forums that allow each participant to share important information about themselves and the constituencies they represent. A closer look at the collaborators can also help to identify individuals in the group who have unique power, motivation and resources; remember, resources are not always about money! Insights into

potential turf battle insights can also be obtained along with a clearer view of the overall strengths and challenges within the collaboration.

2. **Create a Charter for the Collaboration.** It is highly recommended to create a written charter for a collaboration that lays out the common goals and working relationships for the group. This is conceptually similar to having bylaws to guide a Board of Directors. Elements to include in the charter, at a minimum, are:
  - *Mission:* The purpose of the collaboration – the fundamental reasons for the collaboration’s existence.
  - *Vision:* An image of the desired future, described in the present tense, as if it were happening now. Ideally, the vision is created and embraced by all collaborative partners. It is best if the vision is supported by a description of the specific goals or outcomes to be achieved by the collaboration.
  - *Values and Principles:* The beliefs individuals and the group hold. Values and principles are the guides for creating working relationships and describe how the group intends to operate on a day-by-day basis.
  - *Membership:* Identification of the constituencies to include as members of the group, as well as guidelines for adding or replacing members.
  - *Decision Making:* Protocols that define how decisions will be made by the collaboration. For example, is a simple majority sufficient? Is true consensus needed for some or all decision?
  
3. **Develop Memorandums of Understanding.** Written agreements should be developed with and signed by each group or organization participating in the collaboration that spells out the basic guidelines regarding roles and responsibilities of the organization, expected level of participation, resources to be made available to the collaboration and designation of one or more liaisons to provide consistent participation and clear channels of communication between the collaborative and the participating agencies.
  
4. **Establish an Evaluation Plan for the Collaboration.** Collaborations can be strengthened by defining specific outcomes to be achieved that are supported by input from the community and relevant “hard data” showing the rationale for its outcomes, and then establishing an evaluation plan to periodically measure and reflect on outcome achievement. An evaluation plan is useful on many levels – to ensure that attainable goals are defined, to further create a shared vision for the work of the collaboration, and to establish accountability standards for performance. Components of an evaluation plan are listed below.
  - *Outcomes:* Outcomes are the specific community results or impacts to be pursued through the group’s efforts. A group that focuses on defining the desired outcomes in the initial stage of building the collaboration is more likely to increase its effectiveness and the likelihood of engaging greater participation by a wide cross section of people and groups to create the vision. Outcomes may range from "communities valuing and supporting life-long learning" or "ensuring diversified livable wage jobs for families," or "area businesses reporting a decrease in vandalism and increased public safety." Outcomes do not include "increasing services" or "building a community center;" these may be strategies or actions used to attain the desired outcome.
  - *Indicators:* Short term measures of achievement of outcomes, the “how” in knowing whether you have achieved an outcome. These may include use of data counts, change in beliefs or behaviors, or establishment of new policies.
  - *Timeframe:* Establishing when specific outcomes will be accomplished by and when they will be evaluated.

- *Resources Needed:* Identifying the resources needed to accomplish specific outcomes; the “what is it” and “who has it.”
5. **Establish Internal Communication Protocols.** Collaborative efforts are dependent upon open and clear communication. Methods that can help create effective communication within the collaborative group are outlined below.
    - One way to promote effective communications is to develop "language" which is acceptable to all members, using common terms that are well defined and understood by all members so that shared meaning can occur.
    - Establish a format for conduct of meetings and decision-making early in the development of the collaboration. Utilize agendas for each meeting, listing the purpose and goals for the meeting along with the specific topics to be discussed. Send this out ahead of time.
    - Keep the meetings moving toward the agreed goals. Each meeting should create progress toward the overall target(s) and participants should recognize this progress when they leave. Remember, participants’ time is valuable!
    - A formal process for communication between meetings must be established. Options include weekly e-mail updates, blogs or equivalent, phone calls, meeting minutes recorded and distributed to members, mailings, and faxed updates.
  6. **Develop External Communication Methods.** Communication from the collaboration to the broader community must be established. Ideally, this would involve the development of a public communications plan; see the research brief on “Building and Sustaining Key Champions and Broad-Based Community Support” for more information on creating a communications plan. Special issues to consider with a collaboration in the area of external communications are:
    - Be explicit about who is authorized to serve as spokespersons for the collaboration when communicating with the media and other formal information channels.
    - Make sure that public communications give credit and recognition to the individual collaborative partners, along with letting the community know about all of the successes the collaborative as a whole has had.
  7. **Plan for Sustainability of the Collaboration.** The collaboration should have a plan for sustaining membership and resources. This involves membership guidelines relating to terms of office, time commitment, responsibilities, and replacement of members. Similarly, resource development efforts must be ongoing to assure that the appropriate level of revenue, time and people are available to conduct the group's programming efforts. The collaboration must be able to identify emerging trends and issues and develop strategies for needed expansion. In general there are four types of “resources” (or capital): environmental, in-kind, financial, and human.
  8. **Share Leadership.** Collaborations are stronger and more sustainable if they don’t rely exclusively on one charismatic leader but rather allow all of the members to have leadership opportunities. This can include:
    - Training members on meeting management and facilitation, and then rotating responsibilities to organize and facilitate meetings.
    - Distributing leadership responsibilities for individual goals or projects within the collaboration.

In considering these various strategies, it is important to acknowledge that the impact of history, meaning the community's past with regard to working cooperatively or competitively. Collaboration is more likely to succeed in communities that have a history of working together cooperatively. If your community has this history, then collaboration and collaborative relationships have become institutionalized in some way. Use this as an opportunity to learn from the past and apply that knowledge to your cause. Who were/are

the actors, the organizations, the individuals who have been involved in these collaborations? What worked well and why? What didn't work and why? What other lessons were learned? Build relationships and seek strategic advice and support from these past collaborators. You can also use these insights for invoke community history when communicating with the public, drawing parallels to the current situation.

Another powerful force to acknowledge is political climate. Political climate is the history and environment surrounding power and decision making in your community. Political climate may be within the community as a whole, systems within the community, or networks of people. Collaborations which have support and endorsement of key people, groups and organizations in power are more likely to be effective in reaching the agreed upon outcomes. Effective collaborations have the potential of fostering new and emerging leaders. Together with existing people in power, new and emerging leaders find an opportunity to align themselves with an agreed-upon shared focus and a wide range of people within the community who are committed to reaching positive outcomes.

## **WHAT TO AVOID – WHY COLLABORATIONS FAIL**

The conditions that have been shown to most frequently cause collaborations to fail, either from their inception or later on in their existence, are:

- ◆ Loss of direction or focus
- ◆ Lack of leadership, loss of leadership, or struggles for leadership
- ◆ The “Founding Member Syndrome” – founding members gain too much power and block the growth of the collaboration, new members are excluded from decision-making, founding members are unwilling to change as the collaboration grows or community needs change
- ◆ Unequal involvement and recognition of members
- ◆ Poor planning efforts
- ◆ Negative publicity
- ◆ Failure of planned projects – even when projects are well planned, some will not succeed and this lack of success may be attributed to the collaboration itself, damaging morale and the incentive to continue with collaborative efforts
- ◆ Burn out or unrealistic demands on members
- ◆ Bureaucratic structure
- ◆ Turf battles and competition
- ◆ Substantial ideological differences and misunderstandings
- ◆ Unwillingness of members to contribute the resources needed to succeed
- ◆ Historical disagreements between group members