



Four Keys to Collaboration Success

by Carol Lukas, author of 'Consulting with Nonprofits' and Rebecca Andrews

As a consultant I'm often asked, "Why do some collaborations succeed and others fail?" As you can imagine, there are many factors involved (see *20 Factors Influencing Collaboration Success* below). However, having consulted with more than 50 collaborations in the past 10 years, I've identified four keys that – while not a guarantee to success – are essential to a well-functioning collaboration.

Those keys are:

1. Clarify the purpose
2. Let form follow function
3. Involve the right people
4. Get it in writing

Clarify the Purpose

Imagine a colleague calls and says, "Our organizations can have greater impact if we collaborate on this project." "Great, let's meet," is the response. After three meetings, our colleague is talking about the mission for the collaboration and what we want to achieve together in the next year. You're thinking, "Year? All I ever planned to give this was half-a-dozen meetings at the most."

Many people think that anytime they're working together, they're collaborating. They also assume that everyone has a similar notion of what collaboration means. Actually, there are many ways to work together, with varying levels of intensity in the relationship between partners. Knowing what you want to accomplish will determine whether you need to cooperate, or coordinate, or collaborate. The table below illustrates this continuum:

(From *Collaboration Handbook*, by Michael Winer and Karen Ray. Published by the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.)

Cooperation lower intensity	Coordination	Collaboration higher intensity
Shorter-term, informal relationships	Longer-term effort around a project or task	More durable and pervasive relationships
Shared information only	Some planning and division of roles	New structure with commitment to common goals
Separate goals, resources, and structures	Some shared resources, rewards, and risks	All partners contribute resources and share rewards and leadership

True collaboration requires a commitment to shared goals, a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility, mutual authority and accountability for success, and sharing of resources, risks, and rewards. Here's a definition.

Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals.

However you decide to work together, it's important that everyone understands and agrees to the purpose of the collaboration, the degree of commitment required, and the expectations of partners involved in the effort.

There's another important reason for being clear on your purpose. If you do collaborate, you're going to need help from funders and the community. That means you'll need to grab their attention with a compelling, distinctive message. I tell my clients that they should be able to relay their message in the time it takes to ride an elevator. The message should describe what the collaboration is about, why it's important, and why it should be supported. Sometimes even the name can capture the message. For example, a collaborative working to increase affordable housing called itself "2000 x 2000." This captured the heart of their goal, which was to develop 2,000 units of quality, affordable housing by the year 2000.

Let Form Follow Function

Just as there are different ways of working together, there are also different types of collaborations. Simpler is better. Choose the simplest form necessary to achieve your goal. Because time spent on the collaboration is an addition to your regular workload, simple forms save you time.

Here are the three main types of collaboration and their levels of intensity:

	Administration	Development/Advocacy	Service Delivery
Degree of Intensity	Centralized purchasing, benefits programs	New funding streams	Region-wide service delivery system
High	Shared staff (proposal writer, bookkeeper)	Packaged funding requests	Niche specialties shared throughout contracts
↑	Co-location	Advocacy on policy issues e.g., welfare reform, community violence	New program development
Low	Asset management	Media/marketing campaigns	Co-ordinated intake & referral
↓	Asset management	Media/marketing campaigns	Staff exchanges
	Low	Difficulty, Time, Impact	High

Significant increases in efficiency, reach, and impact on mission can be gained with each type of collaborative. But, the difficulty, time required, and potential impact on the people you serve increases as you move to the right side of the chart.

Involve the Right People

If your goal is better referrals between organizations that have the same customer base but different services, a few program staff meetings and cross training for two or three months may be enough to improve access to a wider range of services for constituents. However, if the goal is to change your county's mental health services, having only program staff involved in a few meetings won't cut it. If you're aiming for broad organizational or system changes, top leadership of each organization needs to be at the table and engaged in the collaboration's work. Success in achieving your collaboration's goals may require representatives from other sectors or your constituents (e.g., elected officials, city government, school board, or business sector).

When choosing partners consider these questions:

- Do you share the same goals?
- Do they have the required capabilities and resources?
- Do they have credibility in the community?
- Do you have a trusting relationship?

As a rule, work with as few people as necessary to get the job done. The more people involved, the greater the number of communications; the greater the intensity; and the greater the difficulty of learning about each other, balancing power, and coordinating your work.

Get It in Writing

The most common reason for a collaboration meltdown is disagreements and uncertainty about operating norms. This is why it's so important to create a collaboration charter.

A charter, also known as an operating agreement or memorandum of understanding, lays out the rules that govern the collaboration. The charter should include the collaboration's mission and purpose; values and assumptions; vision, timelines and milestones; members and membership policies; roles and contributions, policies (competition, conflicts of interest, financial relationships); and norms (participation, decision-making, communication, conflict, meetings). It's especially important to decide what the agreements are for leadership and decision-making.

Getting the Results You're After

Collaboration is a powerful way to accomplish what no single organization can. It's also a complex way to work. Following these four keys will increase the likelihood of your success – and of ultimately getting the results you're after. So take heart and remember – struggle precedes growth!

A free list of resources dealing with the topic of collaboration. This list is useful to collaborations and collaboration consultants.

20 Factors Influencing Collaboration Success

(From Collaboration Handbook, by Michael Winer and Karen Ray. Published by the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.)

Following are twenty factors that research has identified as influencing collaboration success. The factors are grouped into six categories:

- Environment
- Membership Characteristics
- Process and Structure
- Communication
- Purpose
- Resources

To ensure the effectiveness of your collaborative effort, pay attention to all the factors listed.

Factors Related to the Environment

- History of collaboration or cooperation in the community
- Collaborative group seen as a legitimate leader in the community
- Favourable political and social climate

Factors Related to Membership Characteristics

- Mutual respect, understanding, and trust
- Appropriate cross section of members
- Members see collaboration as in their self-interest
- Ability to compromise

Factors Related to Process and Structure

- Members share a stake in both process and outcome
- Multiple layers of participation
- Flexibility
- Development of clear roles and policy guidelines
- Adaptability
- Appropriate pace of development

Factors Related to Communication

- Open and frequent communication
- Established informal relationships and communication links

Factors Related to Purpose

- Concrete, attainable goals and objectives
- Shared vision
- Unique purpose

Factors Related to Resources

- Sufficient funds, staff, materials, and time
- Skilled leadership

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