

Collaboration: An Overview

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Definition

Collaborations (also often called partnerships) involve more or less formal structures, some temporary and some permanent, which bring together a group of people or organizations in a community to implement a new program, to change something that already exists, or to address a specific problem. They involve sharing goals, activities, responsibilities and resources. They're popular strategies for pooling resources to address a particular challenge.

Strategies for Successful Collaboration

- 1 - Systematic planning, leading to objectives and activities that collaboration members can support.
- 2 - Addressing psychological factors, such as power differences or resistances based on previous bad experiences with other collaborations, looking for shared values and self-interests, and building on pre-existing trust that can help overcome bad experiences in the past.
- 3 - Clearly identifying the strong core idea at the heart of the collaboration
- 4 - Finding the needed financial and human resources for the collaboration to be successful
- 5 - Incorporating learnings from other collaborations, both successes and mistakes made
- 6 - Encouraging the collaboration to evolve, responding to the changing community environment
- 7 - Looking at costs and benefits of collaborating over the long haul, including the enduring self-interests and required sacrifices of the participants.

8 - Planning for sustainability at the outset, including creation of a revenue model to provide financial support beyond initial funding

Challenges of Collaboration

- 1 - Not all collaborations work, and the science about effectiveness of collaborations is still limited
- 2 - Not all problems can be solved by collaborations - sometimes the right decision is *not* to collaborate
- 3 - People come to any new collaboration burdened by any negative experiences they've had with them in the past
- 4 - People are tired of putting resources into collaborations that often have limited success (like endless meetings without any noticeable results). This can increase "collaboration fatigue" - people complain about spending half their lives in collaboration meetings
- 5 - Collaborations can sometimes be a tactic for delaying action or obscuring responsibility so that change doesn't happen - but no one individual or organization can be blamed for this outcome

Sustaining a Collaboration

Collaborations, like marriages, tend to change over time, and to sustain them there needs to be recognition of that fact - including structures built in to deal with shifting energies and commitments. Continuity of communication and activity of collaborations also is important. This can be done partly through regularly scheduled meetings, and urging partners to send the same representative to the meetings each time - so that there is also a chance for interpersonal relationships to grow.

Collaborations aren't free - they involve costs of operation which have to be subsidized either internally by the participants or by third parties. They are more likely to be successful over time if they pay attention to funding stability, particularly in the face of external events, such as reductions of public dollars when there is a budget crunch. This means having a "plan B" for approaching other funders or streamlining operations if there are sudden and severe cuts.

Evaluating Collaborations

Collaborations can greatly benefit from some type of evaluation - either to learn how they could be improved, or to provide evidence to justify the resources they use. Some level of evaluation, even if relatively informal, can contribute to a collaboration's impact and sustainability. The book *Evaluating Community Collaborations* brings together basic tools and concepts needed to design an evaluation for many different types of collaborations.

Resources on Collaboration

Following are some useful resources on the science and art of collaboration:

Austin, J. (2000). *The collaboration challenge*. New York: Drucker Foundation.

Backer, T.E. (Ed.) (2003). *Evaluating community collaborations*. New York: Springer.

Backer, T.E. (2002). *Partnership as an art form: What works and what doesn't in arts partnerships*. Encino, CA: Human Interaction Research Institute. (available either in hard copy or PDF through www.humaninteract.org)

Backer, T.E. & Kern, J.P. (2010). *Peer networking and place-based initiatives*. Los Angeles: The California Endowment. (PDF available at www.humaninteract.org)

Backer, T.E. & Norman, A.J. (2000). Partnerships and community change. *California Politics and Policy*, 39-44. (copies available through www.humaninteract.org)

Backer, T.E. & Smith, R. (2011). Peer networking and community change: Improving foundation practice. *Foundation Review*, 2(4), 12-29.

Hesselbein, F., Goldsmith, M. & Somerville, I. (Eds.) (1999). *Leading beyond the walls: How high-performing organizations collaborate for shared success*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kaye, G. & Wolff, T. (1997). *From the ground up: A workbook on coalition building and community development*. Amherst, MA: AHEC/Community Partners.

Kitzi, J. (1997). Easier said than done. *Foundation News and Commentary*, March/April, 39-41.

Kochar, C. & Erickson, M.R. (1993). *Business-education partnerships for the 21st century: A practical guide for school improvement*. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen Publishers.

LaPiana, D. (2001). *Real collaboration: A guide for grantmakers*. Published online by Strategic Solutions, www.lapiana.org.

Linden, R. (2002). *Working across boundaries: Making collaboration work in government and nonprofit organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mattessich, P.W. & Monsey, B.R. (1992). *Collaboration: What makes it work*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

Minkler, M. (Ed.) (1997). *Community organizing and community building for health*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Ray, K. (2002). *The nimble collaboration: Fine-tuning your collaboration for lasting success*. Minneapolis: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

Tushnet, N. (1993). *A guide to developing educational partnerships*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Wallace, N. (2011). A grant maker requires grantees to collaborate. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, January 13, 25.

Winer, M. & Ray, K. (1994). *Collaboration handbook: Creating, sustaining and enjoying the journey*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.