

Collaboration Tools for Success

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Collaboration is a barn raising and the party afterwards! But before the barn is raised, a lot of preparation is required. The ground must be cleared, supplies laid in, plans drawn up and community members organized. One person is identified to be in charge and older, experienced members of the community are crew chiefs. Everyone in the community has a role; the boys fetch parts and tools and the children watch and learn. But most important, there is consensus about a common goal.

Barn raisings recognized that by working together, everyone in the community gained. Today, collaboration has become the buzzword for inter-institutional work. Nonprofit organizations, which must serve ever-growing needs and maximize funding dollars, are increasingly exploring cross-institutional collaboration as a tool to meet existing and new challenges. Funders are encouraging collaboration; practicality and pressures of competition require it.

But before we can measure success or identify the tools necessary for success, we must define success. Generally, collaboration success can be defined in one of four ways¹:

1. Achieving Goals
 - a. Completing a project with tangible results
 - b. Integrating services, thus yielding more comprehensive services for clients
 - c. Accomplishing a social change
 - d. Empowering a constituency
2. Longevity
 - a. Members remain committed and will reconvene for the next barn raising
 - b. Members weather changes in goals, membership, or external variables
3. Gaining Recognition
 - a. Members gain community support and recognition
 - b. Members gain legitimacy
4. Meeting the Needs of Collaboration/Coalition Members
 - a. Members gain tangible rewards: fiscal, technical, joint marketing, etc.
 - b. Members gain new skills, competencies, connections, and information
 - c. Members have an opportunity for creative and innovative work

A consensus among collaboration evaluators is that commitment to the issue or goal is the critical factor in sustaining involvement in a coalition. First and foremost, the coalition or collaborative must have a reason to come together. And it must continually assess movement towards the goal. The potential pitfalls are:

- The goal is too vague
- The goal is too limited
- The goal is not directly relevant to the members
- The goal is not viable for the majority of the members
- The goal is not consistent with the philosophy of the members
- The goal is too difficult to attain, given the resources of the coalition

Resources Needed

- Membership – The strength of the collaboration comes from its active members.

Therefore, membership selection and cultivation needs to be strategic and ongoing.

- Funding – Over time, the collaboration will require a budget and some funding to pay the convener/coordinator, cost for projects, training, etc.
- In-kind contributions from members – Expertise, contacts, meeting or office space, mailing lists, volunteers, organizing skills, and access to significant constituencies are all critical contributions from the members of a collaborative.
- Outside allies and supporters – Sometimes these come from unexpected sources. For example, the *Beginnings* collaborative, organized to prevent alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use during pregnancy, is asking wineries to cooperate by asking pregnant women to abstain from alcohol in their tasting rooms.

Structure and Leadership Challenges

Collaborations depend on shared leadership and power. Over the long term, they must accommodate multiple levels of participation, new members, and leadership succession or rotation. A danger over time is that a group of people can become entrenched as leaders or “doers.” This will diminish the group's ability to remain open and inclusive, flexible to new challenges, and discourage new members and leaders from becoming involved.

Attention to Process

Operating procedures need to manage diversity and “level the playing field.” Organizations are generally not accustomed to sharing power and responsibilities. Therefore, they often need access to professional facilitators and mechanisms to assure that the culture provides a context for doing the work in an open and positive environment. Collaborations will need to establish processes for:

- Shared decision-making
- Inclusive communication and outreach
- Conflict resolution
- Orienting new members
- Collective responsibility
- Mutual accountability

Accomplishing the Goal(s)

Doing the work in a collaborative is different from working in a single institution. The challenges are:

- Identify areas of individual and group responsibility
- Divide the labor appropriately
- Maximize and integrate diverse contribution and talents represented by the members
- Pace projects with realistic deadlines

Credit and Recognition

One of the big dangers is that decisions or plans may be made by a privileged few, which invites disaffection or competition from those who feel excluded. The larger membership and community must be kept both apprised and involved in the work of the coalition. Therefore, steps must be taken to ensure that:

- The membership base is kept fully informed
- The membership is kept involved with periodic strategic planning sessions, which will keep the membership engaged and maintain their ownership of coalition work
- The work is continually evaluated to assure accountability

Effective collaborations work together in a changing environment to bring together expertise and talents from the broader community that no one individual or organization can access independently. It is this richness which can empower all of us.

ⁱ Collaboration Success, Hunter College School of Social Work, May, 1994