

Are you ready for collaboration?

Contributed by Patricia Gomez, Legal & Organizational Nonprofit Consultant

The decision to participate in a collaborative should not be made lightly. It can be one of the most important decisions effecting the smooth operation of your organization, the morale of your employees and the achievement of your mission. Before coming to the table you should consider both suitability of the project as well as the readiness of your organization and the proposed partners.

Assessing the readiness of your organization turns on numerous factors. Some are straightforward operational, others relate to organizational alignment. A few practical considerations include:

	Y	N	Comment
Do you have staff or volunteers with the time and expertise to participate in the project?			
What are the time and resource commitments and can you afford to invest?			
Will it distract from other operations or cause an undue hardship on staff demands?			
Are there opportunity costs associated with participation (i.e. what else could you do that you cannot do if you are participating)?			
Are key decision-makers such as executive staff and board members committed to the partnership?			
How might stakeholders such as donors, clients and the public perceive your participation in the collaboration?			
What are your organization's strengths and weaknesses that will impact the roles you can play within the collaboration?			

The characteristics of a project define the best type of partnership for the project. To get to an understanding of the characteristics the group first must have a clarity of purpose. During initial discussions, explore the goals and expectations of all involved. Challenge each partner to be clear and honest about their interest in working with one another and what each hopes to accomplish. Seek to establish early the agreed upon objectives and assess if they are aligned with the each organizations' visions and missions. The decision to work together is best made when everyone understands and agrees on the purpose of the collaboration, the expectations of the partners involved and the degree of commitment required. Moreover, engaging in these dialogues early in the process is more than an exchange of information. Trust and mutual respect among the partners underlies virtually every successful collaboration. Early, open communication begins to build that essential foundation while you make your assessment whether and how to move forward in the proposed collaborative venture.



As your understanding of the scope of the project crystallizes, it begins to inform you of the type of partnership structure for a successful collaborative. Collaborations lie on a continuum requiring differing degrees of commitment. The table below illustrates one researcher's description:

(From Collaboration Handbook, by Michael Winer and Karen Ray.)

Cooperation	Coordination	Collaboration
Lower intensity		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

Others name these partnership relationships as collaboration, strategic alliances and corporate integrations (LaPiana Associates). Regardless, they agree that the activities shape the type of relationship, which in turn defines the degree of intensity required of the partners. In other words, the form of the collaborative relationship follows the function, or the goal, the collaboration seeks to accomplish.

Here are the three common types of collaborations and the level of intensity you can expect to devote:

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

The Wilderness Society & National Audubon Society Guide for Environmental Advocates describes this similarly as “A Continuum of Caution, Consultation and Process Protection.” It identifies several polar characteristics of natural resource collaboratives (e.g. large scope/limited scope; large constituency/limited constituency; long-term impact/brief impact; fundamental values at stake/lesser significance). Characteristics at the more complex pole require greater caution, consultation and process discipline while the opposite end give the partners more freedom and flexibility in the collaborative process.

As you begin discussions with potential partners identify the characteristics of the project so you can knowingly anticipate the time, intensity and cautions demanded, and the ability of your organization to fulfill these demands. As importantly, it allows you to assess whether you have

the right partners. The goal sought can define both the appropriate partners and the people within an organization who should be involved. The direct service providers may be the most valuable for collaborating towards a seamless service delivery system among providers. On the other hand, where organizational or system changes across sectors is the aim, top leadership needs to be engaged and committed. Each organization has strengths or services to contribute and should be equally invested.

Successful collaborations allow organizations to achieve their goals, missions and visions that independently they cannot accomplish. Strong strategic partnerships can decrease duplication, competition and overlap of services; bring diverse ranges of approaches to complex social problems; and lead to stronger nonprofit and cross-sector alliances. No one factor can be a predictor of a successful collaboration. However, engaging in a thoughtful assessment of your organization's internal readiness and having a clear understanding of the purpose, expectations and anticipated form of the partnership relationship in the initial stages will go a long way to achieving the collaborative's goal.