Successful Collaborations

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Collaboration Defined

In its most concise form, **collaboration** means "to work together." According to the Fieldstone Alliance, collaboration is "a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve results they are more likely to achieve together than alone." This relationship includes commitment to mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and awards. In an effective collaboration, members are committed as much to the common collaborative objectives as they are to their own organizational goals. As a result of a successful collaboration, services are coordinated and improved, and each individual agency is able to respond more effectively with new expertise developed through the process.

Factors Influencing Successful Collaborations

There are many factors that contribute to a successful collaboration. According to a study of collaboration research by the Fieldstone Alliance, factors that lead to the success of a collaboration can be divided into six categories:

- **Environmental Factors** - Is there a favorable political climate? Is there a history of cooperation in the community?
- **Membership Characteristics** - Is there mutual respect and trust among members? Are the correct people involved? Does the purpose serve all? Is there flexibility among members?
- **Process and Structure** - Do participants have clear roles? Has the group developed policies and procedures? Do all members have a stake in the outcomes? Is the collaboration able to adapt?
- **Communication** - Is there an established communication plan? Is communication clear?
- **Purpose** - Is there a shared vision? Are the goals obtainable?
- **Resources** - Are there sufficient funds, staff and skilled leadership?

Elements to Strengthen Your Collaboration

1. **Succinct and Flexible Purpose**

   A collaboration's purpose is the reason for its creation: the purpose is the ultimate result that the collaboration desires. It is important to establish a solid mutual purpose to build the foundation of your collaboration and to ensure that all members are equally informed, in agreement and committed.

   Mission Statement

   The mission statement is the clearly-stated purpose behind the collaboration. It encompasses the goals and objectives toward which the collaborative will work. A strong mission statement

will be the backbone of all collaborative efforts and is important to ensure commitment and coordination. A good mission statement should be meaningful for those within the collaboration and for the public.

- Be sure to compose a mission statement prior to engaging in specific activities
- Establish a consensus between *all* organizational partners on the content of your mission statement prior to its implementation
- Focus your mission on your core competencies and activities
- Allow your mission statement sufficient room for growth and change

Goals and Objectives

Collaborations need goals and objectives in order to be effective. Clear, motivating goals provide collaboration members with a sense of opportunity, challenge, and consequence, and they give the collaboration a sense of purpose. In essence, goals and objectives allow members to understand and participate in what the collaboration is doing. They are most effective when written down and agreed upon.

- Facilitate a process to define your collaborative goals and objectives
- Determine your goals for *how* you will achieve the ultimate result of your collaboration (your mission). For example, if your mission is "to improve accessibility to services for all victims of violence," a goal may be to "train sexual assault service providers to understand barriers to accessibility for Deaf women."
- Develop goals/standards for how your collaboration will work. Include goals related to collaborative communication, conflict, negotiation, meetings, leadership and relationships. For example, a goal related to communication may be to "maintain monthly newsletters," and a goal related to conflict may be to "promptly resolve conflict and learn from the experience to prevent future situations."

Work Plan

A strong work plan clearly articulates how to achieve the mission and goals of the collaboration. The work plan will allow the organizations in the collaboration to initiate collaborative processes with straightforward strategies. The work plan should explain *how* to accomplish the objectives of your collaboration. It should include:

- Key activities
- Who is responsible for the key activities?
- Resources necessary, including both what is available and what is needed
- A timeline
- Potential barriers to accomplishment
- A communications plan
- A description of the final product(s)

Once established, the work plan should be distributed to all members of the collaboration. The work plan will be an important tool to have at meetings, and may be adapted and improved as the collaborative process unfolds.

2. <u>Clearly Defined Roles and Responsibilities</u>

Distinct and meaningful roles form the collaborative foundation and ensure that the items listed in your work plan are accomplished effectively. Clarity and trust in each individual's roles and responsibilities are important to avoid members encroaching on the responsibilities of others or omitting necessary tasks, and to make sure that members' unique roles and expertise are utilized.

Strong Leadership

Strong, effective leadership is crucial to the successful operation of a collaboration. A leadership structure should be developed by recognizing the strengths and needs of each leader and organization. Multiple people at different levels of both policy and direct services should be engaged in leadership.

Consider what type of leadership structure would be effective in your collaboration. For example, a leadership structure may include one or several rotating point people in leadership roles, a steering committee, or sub-committees.

Actions for Effective Leadership
- Define goals and guide the group
- Facilitate and support the team
- Validate and trust individual, group and organizational strengths
- Monitor the group's progress
- Help overcome obstacles and minimize conflict
- Provide sufficient structure so that the collaboration achieves its goals, while also remaining flexible enough to encourage creativity and positive change

Individual Respect and Responsibilities

In collaborations, each member makes an important contribution and shares ownership of the project. In a successful collaboration, all contributors and their roles are respected and trusted.
- Engage each individual's and agency's strengths in the collaborative process
- Respect each member's areas of expertise and skill
- Define individual roles in order to ensure positive, transparent, and effective interaction
- Do not interfere with a member's role unless it is harming the collaboration or assistance is requested

Organizational Cultures

It is a fundamental responsibility for key partners to mutually respect other agencies' organizational cultures and value each partner's contribution to the collaboration. It is important to recognize that while each agency has come together to pursue the same objectives, each is coming from its own unique position and may have a different way of understanding the problem or accomplishing the goals.

It may challenge the collaborative to reconcile these different approaches, but understanding distinct roles, perspectives and expertise is an invaluable attribute when working together. Diversity of experience and opinion will generate new ideas and solutions, and understanding different approaches can improve each agency's ability to serve clients with varying needs and perspectives.

Each organization's culture is directly related to why it is a member of the team, and what it brings to the table. Language, values, priorities, policies and ways of doing business can be vastly different between organizations. In particular, agencies represented on a CCR will likely have different perspectives on violence, as well as different terminology, emphasis and concerns.

Tips for Learning about Organizational Cultures
- Have each agency give a presentation about their work during the formation of the collaboration
- Include information about and an explanation of each agency's mission, philosophy, function and purpose
- Define terms that may appear common but are understood differently among agencies
- Create space to explore differences and commonalities among collaborating partners. If differences exist, determine if they are in areas where consensus is needed. If so, work towards consensus through dialogue and facilitated discussions. If not, come up with strategies to accept one another's differences.

Equitable Budget and Finance
Lack of resources is one of the biggest obstacles to a collaboration's success, so it is important to equitably share resources and maintain ongoing dialogue about resource needs. It is also important to make a record of budget information as it relates to organizational responsibility. Roles and resources may change such that finances may need readjustment. Regularly evaluate each member's financial situation to ensure parity and success.
- Make sure budget plans are consistent and appropriate, and take into account each member's contribution
- Share any costs that may occur
- Strategize a plan to pool resources – environmental, financial, human or in-kind – if necessary
- Develop joint strategies that can increase resources
- Conduct ongoing resource development efforts to assure that the appropriate level of revenue, time, and people are available to conduct the collaborative efforts
- Plan for both the short-term and the long-term
- Include line items in the budget for accommodations and other costs related to accessibility

3. **Formal Policies and Procedures**

   Policies and procedures help regulate your collaboration's activities and events so that consistency and effectiveness are maintained. They also minimize confusion and conflict while establishing trust and agreement, all important factors in building and maintaining a collaboration over time.

   Decision-Making Strategies

   It is important to establish a decision-making protocol to enable coordination among partners. A clearly defined protocol will help minimize inefficiency and conflict, and will maximize continuity and agreement.

   Different decision-making styles may be used for different situations, depending on who the decision may impact, how much time is allotted, and whose support is needed. Try to anticipate the kinds of decisions your collaboration will be making. Then, create a protocol clearly defining what style of decision-making will be used for each decision type. For example, your protocol may call for **consensus decisions**, in which everyone must agree before the decision is made, or **democratic decisions**, which are settled by vote and require that the minority voters still support the decision. **Autonomous decisions** may also be useful in situations where the decision does not impact others or needs only the decision-maker to implement it.

   Conflict Resolution Protocol

   It is likely that in the course of close collaboration conflicts may arise. It is important to establish a well-defined protocol for conflict management before the issues appear, and aim to resolve conflict as quickly as possible. The collaborative should also develop a policy for determining the roles of leadership in addressing conflict, including when external help may be needed. Each organization's culture should be taken into account when determining a resolution process.

   Considerations for Creating a Conflict Resolution Protocol
   - Implement both informal and formal complaint processes. Informal processes may include discussions with a collaborative leader or other point person, and formal processes may include written or oral complaints.
   - Appoint a "Dispute Resolution Coordinator" as the initial point of contact for individuals seeking conflict management. The coordinator should be able to provide guidance about what method of conflict resolution to use and refer people to the next point of contact.
   - Use a mediation process for conflict resolution, in which a neutral third party sits down with the parties in conflict to look for mutually acceptable solutions. You may consider appointing a mediation committee.
   - Train leaders, meeting facilitators and collaborative members in personnel management and conflict resolution

Five Tips for Resolving Conflict
1. When a problem arises, make sure it is thoroughly explored until everyone understands what the problem is
2. Consider why the problem exists and what the causes are before proposing answers
3. Make sure everyone involved discusses the pros and cons of several different alternative solutions to a problem (do not necessarily accept the first solution that is proposed)
4. When a group decides upon which solution to adopt and implement, make certain it is clear what the decision is, who should carry it out, and when (do not assume that those involved will take care of issues without much structure)
5. Follow up with decisions reached at meetings to see how they work out in practice

Meeting Guidelines
The establishment of standard meeting guidelines will keep meetings on track and ensure that they are productive. Once they are created, distribute the meeting guidelines to all members of the collaboration.
- Schedule meetings in advance
- Maintain a regular schedule for repeating meetings
- Hold your meeting at a location that is accessible
- Prior to the meeting, ask participants for their accessibility requirements
- Provide support and accommodations to ensure accessibility and equal access to participation at the meeting
- Identify a facilitator for each meeting. Use an external facilitator when appropriate
- Create an agenda. Include input from all members
- Distribute the agenda prior to the meeting (bring the agenda to the meeting)
- Ensure the agenda's accessibility
- Be on time. Establish requirements for maintaining a timely schedule
- Take notes during the meeting; distribute them to all members
- Review the notes at the beginning of the next meeting (ask participants if they suggest any changes and if they accept the notes)

4. **Open and Frequent Communication**
As collaborations advance and differences emerge, regular open communication will facilitate progress and minimize miscommunications. Involving all collaborative members in communication efforts and encouraging the exchange of ideas and information will also motivate members to achieve goals and objectives and increase productivity, buy-in and trust. A communications plan will ease the communications process.

Communications Plan
Collaborative activities and successes are dependent upon open, clear and frequent communication. Be sure to update organizational partners in writing about important information to minimize miscommunication. Collaborations that employ both formal and

informal networks of communication to support them are more likely to succeed. A clear communications plan should outline how your collaboration will achieve and maintain effective communication. A communications plan should include the following:
- A clearly visible meeting schedule
- How often communication will take place outside of meetings
- When communication will take place via phone, email, mail and personal interaction
- A list of contact people at each organization (including phone and email)
- Common terminology and vocabulary
- A strategy and methods for communication with the larger community, such as community leaders and media

5. **Strong and Sustainable Relationships**
   It is important to build relationships to strengthen the partnership and commitment to mutual goals. While each of the categories listed in this section contributes to relationship maintenance, relationships are the cornerstone of a collaboration and extra time should be allotted to develop them. Communication beyond work and organizational matters will facilitate trust and motivation.

   Fostering Inter-Organizational Relationships
   Collaborations succeed in an environment that is oriented towards working together and away from competition. Good inter-organizational relationships will strengthen the collaboration and commitment to mutual goals. Regular interaction will make the collaboration more natural and effective. Communication and events outside of work will enhance motivation which can rejuvenate commitment and keep the collaboration on track.
   - Create time within meeting agendas to use brief presentations to help the group understand the project as a whole, as well as all of the parts
   - Organize social events to develop relationships with each partner organization and its staff members
   - Maintain a newsletter or regular emails with updates and information; this is especially important to sustain relationships with people whose collaborative role is not regularly enacted
   - Use icebreaker activities at both meetings and social events to help with introductions and create awareness about each organization's history and culture

   Giving Credit and Showing Appreciation
   Giving credit and showing appreciation, especially across organizational boundaries, will go a long way toward building relationships and increasing cooperation, morale and productivity. Praise and recognition will motivate individuals to put forth their best effort; these rewards are often an incentive for members to persevere and commit to their goals.

   Communicate members' achievements to all parties involved. This will not only gratify the individual, but it will increase communication and awareness on behalf of the whole

collaboration. After all, the collaborating organizations are expected to better achieve the goal together than any of the individual organizations could do alone.

Considerations for How to Give Credit
- Openly thanking individuals for their work during meetings and in emails
- Including an acknowledgements section when writing a report or giving a presentation
- Giving annual recognition at a collaboration social event

6. **Ongoing Evaluation**
Implementation of a feedback system is critical in keeping the collaboration on track and satisfying both collaboration needs and individuals' wishes. Feedback should measure progress and members' responses to the process in order to guarantee improvement and productivity.

Soliciting Feedback
Continually discussing organizational needs and exploring methods for serving all members of the collaboration should be an essential part of the process. It is helpful to inform members early on that soliciting feedback on the collaborative process will occur on an ongoing basis. Allowing all participants to voice their opinions makes everyone feel valued and avoids leaving out topics that may need attention. To ensure that people provide honest feedback, it is important to create an environment where people are comfortable speaking openly about what is working and what may need improvement.

Feedback Topics to Consider
- What works well with the collaboration? What are areas for growth?
- How is your work valued by members of the collaboration?
- How effectively are meetings run?
- How effective is the communication structure within the collaboration?
- How effective is conflict management within the collaboration?

Figure out how to respond effectively to constructive feedback from the collaboration. Address all outstanding issues. Effective response to constructive criticism will reduce friction and provide good examples and insight for the future.

Monitoring Progress
Regular assessments of the collaboration's outcome progress will keep the collaboration on track and generate productive changes by increasing accountability. Assessments should measure the effectiveness of collaboration efforts toward goals and objectives as outlined in the collaborative work plan. Regular benchmarks for assessments should be enforced, and programs and services should be improved if need be. Midcourse adjustments should not be viewed as barriers to the success of a collaborative, but as a healthy part of the progress. These evaluations can help secure future funding! Assessments should identify areas that need

improvement, recognize areas where success was achieved, and suggest future possibilities. The work plan can serve as a guide to what should be evaluated.

Assessment Questions to Consider
- Did the collaboration accomplish what it intended to do?
- What challenges occurred?
- How can the challenges be overcome?
- How were goals and objectives met or not met?
- What are logical next steps?
- How were the channels of communication effective or ineffective with constituents, funders, and partners?
- How was the leadership structure effective or ineffective?
- How were resources allocated?

Sharing Lessons Learned
There will undoubtedly be experiences of collaboration, conflict, success and failure. Various barriers are likely to challenge collaboration efforts. Some situations may be anticipated, and others may be unpredictable. Share lessons learned from these encounters so that collaborations may build upon past experiences and learn best practices for anticipating the challenges, developing proactive solutions and achieving goals. The more open the communication and the more feedback is shared, the stronger the collaboration will be. Celebrate successes internally and externally as part of the sharing process. Be sure to be patient, flexible and have fun!