

Organizing and Sustaining Collaborative Workgroups

Introduction and Context

For many reasons, most successful government, civic, and business organizations are now actively cultivating collaborative relationships with other groups. Organizations who have operated in the same community, but who have had little contact other than mutual information sharing or exchange of goods and services, are now trying to design working arrangements that share resources, sustain healthy interpersonal working relationships, and can be evaluated with real customer satisfaction outcomes.

What is a Collaborative?

The term “collaborative” is an umbrella term for the structural design of any group of people who have an identified mission, differing self-interests, and a capacity to contribute to the activities designed to support the groups mission. It is important to note that a collaborative may not involve equal contributions of power, resources, or decision-making, and can be implemented between different departments in the same organization, or by connecting two or more independent groups together. The groups can be comprised of any business (profit or nonprofit), volunteer service group, school, or other entity that is recognized by the other parties as a group with something to contribute. In general terms, collaboratives are relationship-oriented and tend to be formed around activities that will require sustained interaction between the parties for a duration of time.

How is it different from other types of workgroups?

The fundamental criteria of a Collaborative that distinguishes it from other types of teams (Networking, Coordination / Referral, Cooperatives) is that the participants are willing to look at changes in the fundamental power relationships and traditional patterns of working together. Collaborative workgroups believe that it is not enough to focus solely on the service / product being delivered. Long term success involves learning about how to increase the relational capacity of the participants. This does not mean “group therapy”, but rather attention to agreeing on communication strategies, clarifying how decisions will be made, having a conflict resolution process agreed to, and sufficient attention paid to clarifying similar and divergent values and acknowledging the needs of all parties.

What does it mean for individual employees and organizations?

When the capacity to initiate and sustain collaboratives exists in an organization, it tends to change the working style of the employee group over time. Individual employees often report a reduction in stress, less feeling of isolation, more willingness to be creative in problem solving, less willing to let conflict go unresolved, and an increased attachment of their personal values / goals with the mission of the organization. In turn, organizations often report increased outcomes, more coherent strategies, fiscal economies, and increased positive visibility in their community.

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Steps in Organizing and Sustaining A Service Collaborative

Step One

Assessing the Need: Designing the right workgroup structure for your purpose.

Participants: Small leadership or initiating group

Components: Evaluating current status of collaboration and need. Evaluate possible workgroup structures and decide on a format that meets your need. Selecting partners and initiating collaborative process. Working out initial conflicts about time, process, self-interest, and authority.

Step Two

Sustaining Healthy Relationships In Collaborative Groups

Participants: Full collaborative group

Components: Group establishes working rules for participation that encourage healthy communication, conflict resolution, and creative solutions. Established a conflict resolution process agreeable to participants. Develops meeting formats and agenda designs. Establish group skills of initiating stories to strengthen relationships, setting rituals that continue to welcome all participants, and trust-building activities.

Step Three

Determining Self Interest: Clarifying differing interests and establishing needs

Participants: Full collaborative group

Components: Participants identify their needs and interests in collaborating. Partners complete questioning process that clarifies interests within a framework of values, strategies, and structure.

Step Four

Designating Leadership: Developing authority structures and decision-making processes.

Participants: Full collaborative group

Components: Group decides on authority structure including who gets to make what kinds of decisions, what types of decision-making processes will be used, how situational authority will be identified, and how meetings will be facilitated.

Step Five

Establishing Vision and Purpose: Setting Goals, Tasks, and Timelines.

Participants: Full collaborative group

Components: The group, using its self-interest data gathered from Section Three, develops a Values and Principles document, identifies goals and strategies, designates who will complete each task, and sets timelines.

Step Six

Who's Got What?: Identifying and agreeing on the contributions of participants.

Participants: Full collaborative group

Components: Participants identify the full range of resources they bring to the groups goals including, but not

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limited to, technical expertise, community relationships, staff skills, financial resources, historical experience, connections with other partners, physical resources, management, and influence.

Step Seven

Stories of Success: Designing and using powerful customer and staff stories to increase support for your Collaborative's outcomes.

Participants: Interested collaborative partners and customers

Components: Development and delivery of powerful stories to influence customers, funders, community members and others in the success and quality of your collaborative's work. Community change strategies based on situational storytelling are developed and practiced.

Step Eight

Are We Getting There?: Developing and using simple evaluation tools for gauging success.

Participants: Designated representatives from each collaborating entity

Components: Designing a collaborative evaluation process that meets partners differing self-interests by combining data-based, qualitative, and anecdotal information gathering as the basis for evaluation. This type of evaluation is formative, and is designed to give on-going feedback to the collaborators in their efforts to continually improve their outcomes and processes.