



KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

Special Report

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Serving Children and Families By Promoting
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A collaboration is a mutually-beneficial and well-defined relationship among two or more organizations to jointly develop structure and share responsibility, resources, authority, accountability, and rewards for attaining common goals.

Why Have A Collaboration?

To accomplish a common goal that none of the units alone can attain as well or at all.

To prevent teenage pregnancy in a town, the schools offered sex education and program prevention classes, a few hospitals opened teenage health clinics, and other agencies offered life skills and decision-making workshops. But few teenagers knew about or could easily access all these services, and research indicates that the more of these different services high-risk teens received, the greater the pregnancy-prevention benefit. Since no one organization could offer all the services, they formed a collaboration to help teenagers access all the services in a coordinated manner.¹

To serve more clients, offer more services and reduce duplication.^{2,3}

The demand for early intervention in a city was growing rapidly. There were two independent early intervention agencies providing services, but the caseworkers had reached their capacity in time, energy, and resources. The two agencies met and discussed joining together to share the increasing demand for services. Caseworkers were able to take cases closer to their homes or offices; therefore, they had more time to serve more clients. Further, children who moved out of one service area were able to transition smoothly between the agencies without losing services or repeating time-consuming paperwork.

To help agencies share information, resources, staff, and equipment to achieve a common purpose.

Teachers at a rural school needed technical assistance to explain their new computers to the students. A

company with many computer experts offered free assistance by teaching in the classrooms once a week for at least one semester. The school gained computer expertise and the company gained advertisement of their product in a wider territory as well as information on how to improve their product for educational purposes.⁴

To create an awareness of needs, problems, or opportunities in the environment.

A neighborhood faced problems of deteriorating housing, poor landlords, and high unemployment. Neighborhood organizations formed a collaboration to deal with their problems. First they met with police, social service agencies, politicians, and a neighborhood redevelopment agency to alert them to the problems and explore solutions. Second, the group developed common goals and objectives and coordinated these resources to improve the neighborhood.⁵

Characteristics Of Successful Collaboration

A successful collaboration develops clear, concrete, achievable goals.

- Clear, achievable goals provide direction, purpose, and cohesiveness, while ambiguous or unachievable goals diminish enthusiasm for collaborative work.
- Well articulated goals help to produce realistic timelines.
- Achievement of a sequence of clear short-term and long-term goals motivates future action and helps to sustain the collaboration.

Successful collaborations operate in a receptive environment that facilitates its work.

In general, a collaboration must determine what support is necessary to advance its mission (e.g. political leaders, opinion-makers, persons who control resources, and the general public). It must also:

- Convince key leaders of the worthiness of its mission.
- Set realistic goals to satisfy political and social expectancies as well as service needs.
- Implement goals and processes of the collaboration that are cost-effective and do not compete or conflict with other community endeavors.
- Monitor and act on the changing political and social climate, including mid-course reviews (and revisions, if appropriate) of the vision and goals of the collaboration as well as adjustments in its activities and intended outcomes.
- Regular meetings are essential for establishing and maintaining clear roles, policy guidelines, and responsibilities.
- Agencies and individuals must be committed to be present at each collaboration meeting. Generally, participating individuals should be selected according to their role in the organization, their interest in collaborating with other agencies, and their commitment to devote time and expertise to a team approach to problem solving.
- An implementation plan that includes policy guidelines helps to clarify the roles and responsibilities for members of the collaboration.

Goals should be tailored to the specific community. When the community becomes involved in the efforts of the collaboration, the collaboration receives more information on how to work best in that community.

In communities that have not had collaboratives before, considerable networking and political and grassroots preparation may be necessary before a collaboration will be accepted, supported, and perceived as capable of being effective.

Successful collaborations have good leadership.

- Strong leaders generate political influence and support.^{6,7,8}
- Good leaders get things started and people interested and involved.
- Effective leaders treat participants fairly and help the partners in the collaboration to get along. Such leadership must understand the differences between participants but emphasize their similarities.
- Effective leaders have good interpersonal skills, know the subject matter, and maintain flexibility.
- Strong leaders monitor the progress of the group, keep it on task and on time, and help conquer obstacles.
- Roles and responsibilities of participants should be decided after the collaboration clearly specifies functions it will need to perform, including goals, services and activities to be offered, resources available, program implementation and fiscal management requirements, monitoring and evaluation needs, time frame available, etc.
- Formal agreements between participating agencies should be written to define roles and responsibilities. These can include memoranda of understanding, bylaws if the collaboration is large and complex, a policies and procedures manual, and regular review of the purposes, goals, roles, and procedures of collaboration.
- Appropriate, sufficient, and obtainable resources are necessary for the implementation of guidelines, roles, and responsibilities.
- Periodic evaluations of the collaboration are necessary to maintain guidelines, roles, and responsibilities.
- Shared decision-making by leaders and members consistent with designated roles and responsibilities is essential to the success of a collaboration.
- When members know their own and others' roles and responsibilities, open communication more effectively helps the group focus on a common purpose, increases trust and sharing of resources, and allows members to express and resolve misgivings about planned activities.^{9,10,11}

Successful collaborations understand and respect each member for their different individual role and responsibility.

Successful collaborations build cooperative teams.

Team dynamics are improved through knowing and respecting each member's role and contribution to the group and having a clear understanding and respect for the team's goals.

The collaboration must discuss and resolve issues on which members disagree. To do so, members need to:

- be present at all meetings, especially those at which controversial issues will be decided;
- voice their opinions honestly, frankly, and clearly, and accept such behavior by other members;
- listen and understand a point of view before criticizing it;
- thoroughly discuss all points of view before deciding; and
- accept the resolution attained by the group process.

Fair and open participation in discussions contributes to a feeling of responsibility among all members for the group's decisions and a stronger team spirit.

Typical Challenges To Be Solved In A Collaboration

- **Differences among collaborators** must be understood and acknowledged. Some of these differences can include: *jargon* (different terms used for similar things; *forms* (for billing, hiring procedures, client enrollment, etc.); *staff development* (training staff and licensing requirements); *funding* (restrictions on expenditures); and *regulations* (for facilities, services, staff, etc.).
- **Mixed loyalty** that some members may have to their own organizations rather than to the collaboration can cause problems.¹²
- The **merging of agencies into a collaboration** can cause conflict depending on the nature and style of the collaboration (e.g., confrontation or cooperation in the power structure).¹³

- A **lack of clarity about a collaboration's purpose**, for example, as a means for a specific change or a model for sustained interorganizational cooperation can cause conflict.
- A **lack of awareness of other agencies' functions and operational style** can produce a lack of understanding of different points of view. Visiting other agencies in the collaboration is a good way to become aware of these differences.

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OCD Goes Internet, Launches New Site

With a computer and an Internet connection, anyone with an interest in children, youth, and families now has access to the expertise and publications of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

Its new site on the World Wide Web, www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/, was launched earlier this year to provide easy access via the Internet to a range of topics, projects, events, organizations, and publications related to children and families.

"It's another way of reaching policymakers, the University, professionals, members of the community, and others with what we have to offer," said Anne Farber, Research Associate with OCD's Policy and Evaluation Project and chairperson of the Web site committee. "This is something we've been kicking around for several years."

Much of the information focuses on local issues, projects, initiatives, organizations, and events. But the site also includes information on broader issues, such as those covered in OCD Special Reports.

Online Resources

Resources available at the site include:

- Publications such as the *Developments* newsletter; parenting information on a range of topics; parenting columns; training materials; policy and research projects; and Special Reports on a number of issues, including home-based child care, school transition, preventing teen pregnancy, the impact of television violence on children, and others.
- Information on current partnerships, including those related to Policy and Evaluation, international projects, policy development, service demonstration projects, and human service networks.

- Information on OCD itself, including its mission, vision, history, constituencies, services, and contacts within the Office.
- Links to information about Early Head Start, the Family Support Policy Board, Family Services System Reform, Partnerships for Family Support, and Starting Points.

The site makes liberal use of .pdf files, which allow for easy viewing of large documents and maintains them in their original formats. These files are viewed using the program "Adobe Acrobat Reader," which can be downloaded free of charge from Adobe. The OCD site provides an Internet link to the free download for users who don't already have Adobe Acrobat Reader on their hard drive.

The OCD site was built over the last half of 1998 with support from the University Center for Social and Urban Research. The Webmaster and chief architect is Lucas Musewe. Musewe, a Graduate Research Assistant when he began work on the site, is currently Data Coordinator/Manager for the Partnerships for Family Support.

The site, which began as a kind of grassroots effort within the Office, is overseen by a committee first chaired by Debra Stark, Research Associate with the Policy and Evaluation Project. A team of liaisons help supply the site with updates and other information from various OCD offices and branches. These include Mary Ellen Colella at OCD's office in the Cathedral of Learning, Cathy Kelley at OCD's 121 University Place office; and Annette Harris-Thomas and Cheryl Barnes-Huggins at OCD East on Penn Avenue.

Visit the Office of Child Development on the Internet at www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/. ■