

Contact to Collaboration

Organizations are human institutions. The relationships they form are human relationships. Human relationships require time and effort. The relationships organizations establish for the purpose of working together for a common cause are called alliances. The amount of time and effort two organizations are willing to expend on the alliance defines the nature of their relationship.

Alliances can progress from mere contact to communication to cooperation to collaboration, or the relationship can remain stable at any one of these levels.

CONTACT

Established at the point of introduction. If contacts are to be made, the program or organization must invest the time and effort to go out into the community, the state, the region, or beyond to introduce itself and meet others. Opportunities for this exist at social gatherings, town meetings, state and local trainings, and regional and national conferences. Contacts give faces to programs and organizations. Acquaintances such as these can help identify resources and sources of information that your program or organization can tap into.

COMMUNICATION

Begins when organizations dialogue. The communication can be as simple as sharing information and resources (such as newsletters and mailing lists) or as involved as touching base on issues of common interest, requesting and receiving feedback, advising and consulting.

COOPERATION

A higher level of alliance. In its simplest form, a cooperative relationship which one organization participates in assisting another organization meet a particular goal. A local business may offer a literacy program the use of its parking lot to make the program more accessible to students and program staff. In this form of cooperation, a minimal amount of effort on the part of one organization can provide maximum benefit to another. In its most complex form two or more organizations coordinate and share information or resources but work independently to meet a particular goal. An employment agency with an interest in increasing the skills of its labor pool may refer potential adult learners to a literacy program recruiting students. Likewise, the literacy program may refer students who are looking for jobs to the employment agency. In this form of cooperation, each organization operates independently, careful not to interfere with or duplicate the work of the other. The results are mutually beneficial and those involved in the cooperation can be vigorously involved without really doing anything different in their jobs.

COLLABORATION

The highest and deepest level of alliance. Collaborations require a commitment between two or more programs or organizations to accomplish a purpose or mission that produces a mutually beneficial result. Collaborators share the planning, decision making, cost, and responsibility for the work as equals.

There are several steps a program or organization can take to influence the success of collaborative efforts:

1. Understand what collaboration is and the commitment it requires. For most organizations the most difficult commitment to make is a commitment to share decision-making.
2. Recognize opportunities for collaboration. No one can teach this. It requires vision to foresee the magnitude of the potential benefit, willingness to share the rewards of success as well as the work, and commitment to nurture the collaborative relationship.
3. Identify possible collaborative projects and potential partners. Projects that require more resources than any one program or organization can muster are excellent possibilities. Potential partners are partners who have different, but complementary, resources to commit to the project.
4. Invite potential partners to explore the possibility of collaborating on a project. In the exploration stage the two organizations share information about their abilities to collaborate. They discuss their programs' backgrounds, histories, past experiences with collaborative efforts, internal strengths and weakness, available resources, the benefits each expects from collaborating on the project, and concerns each has about how the collaboration might operate.
5. Make a verbal commitment to collaborate. Each organization must be prepared to demonstrate the level of commitment their organization is prepared to make.
6. Develop a process for collaborating. Agree upon how problems will be approached and how decisions will be made. Determine and describe in writing each organization's role and responsibilities.
7. Collaborate. Plan the project. Develop a strategy that utilizes and maximizes the best resources the two organizations can contribute. Then do it! Expect that problems may arise that require revisiting or revising the collaborative process.
8. Celebrate and recognize your joint efforts. Review and evaluate the collaboration itself. What worked? What didn't work? How can it be improved?

Collaborating for Success

Collaborations are meant to be win-win-win-win propositions. A win for the cause, a win for funders, and a win for each of the two or more organizations involved. Here, in four quick snapshots, are some things to consider, things to watch out for.

Keys to Success

- a shared vision
- skilled leadership
- an agreed upon process
- a viable plan
- constant communication
- trust, reliability and accountability

Possible Barriers

- negative past experiences with collaborations
- difficult past or current relations among participants
- competition or turf issues
- individual personality conflicts
- conflicting organizational cultures
- bureaucratic structures that do not lend themselves to collaboration

Strategies to Minimize Barriers

- keep commitment and activities simple at first
- make open, honest and clear communication a priority
- spend time getting to know one another
- address turf issues and hidden agendas
- establish clearly understood roles and responsibilities in writing
- encourage members to articulate their needs or concerns
- plan activities that are fun

Red Flags and Sand Traps

- poor planning
- loss of direction or focus
- loss of leadership or struggles for leadership
- turf battles
- unequal involvement or recognition of members
- burnout or unrealistic demands on members

11-04, Contact to Collaboration FS