

What factors make or break collaboration?

ideology/core values

It is important to be very conscious of others' values and provide space in the negotiation phase to explore relevant values of all potential partners. If someone is at odds on a fundamental issue, the differences can ruin the collaboration if these concerns are not openly addressed. At the very least, participants can agree to disagree.

leadership

It is important to provide and cultivate new leadership. When seeking leadership, it is important to think about:

- Who has the cleanest credibility with the partners?
- Who has the necessary skills?
- Who has the passion and time?
- Who is willing to make room for others to grow in their leadership and is comfortable "sharing the success" with others?

It is not always beneficial to think of leadership in terms of staff positions. Too often, others say, "We don't need to do that, we'll let the staff person do it." There are two sides to that coin, but this is something to keep in mind.

power

The power is rarely equal among members of a collaboration, still it is important to equally value different powers and make intentional efforts to share the power (like having youth participate on a board without voting privileges). The leader should be willing to share or even defer the power to the group, or the situation could become disempowering. It is important to have ALL impacted parties at the table. These parties should be given the same degree of power.

history

Past failed efforts or "bad blood" between members should be acknowledged and addressed or it will become, at the least, an insidious force working against the collaborative. Just because problems exist does not mean a collaborative should not be attempted, but it does mean the past must be dealt proactively.

competition and turf

Collaborations are often initiated for the wrong reasons such as obtaining resources for “business as usual.” Many funders require collaboration, but if funding is the motivator as opposed to a “greater good” or “shared vision,” the collaborative will not work. It is also important to acknowledge and encourage serving self-interests when they do not violate the self-interests of others.

resources

In this case, resources include two things. First, the resources include what each member can bring to the table in terms of time to participate in/contribute to the effort and skills to successfully complete agreed upon tasks. It is important for all members to really assess whether they can be meaningfully involved before joining, recognizing that “you don’t get something for nothing.” Second, resources involve the total resources available to the collaboration for its efforts. Too many or too few resources is not a good thing. There is no correlation between dollars and success.

conflict

Some often believe that conflict is a precursor to failure. In fact, if there is no conflict, then parties are not truly bringing their unique perspective and values to the table. What is important is that collaborations have a mechanism or approach in place for dealing constructively with conflict that uses “service of the greater good” as the guidepost for resolution.

results

It is important to balance planning with action. Some people are doers and need to feel they are “doing” in order to stay invested and energized. Ongoing check-ins should celebrate enthusiasm and effort as well as provide opportunities to course-correct.

access

It is important for the collaboration to proactively reach out to all relevant sectors of the community to make sure that if they want to be involved, they can be. Often, things like time of meetings, location of meetings, language (including jargon), availability of transportation or child care, and the culture of the meeting (Roberts Rules of Order vs. other less formal approaches) are obstacles that keep others out.

Because professionals are usually the first to become involved in a collaborative, it can be easy to slip into making it convenient for them; but if you want others to participate, it is important to resist the temptation.

o u r e x p e r i e n c e

Successful collaboration is 70% about creating a safe space for a shared vision to be developed. The remaining 30% depends on relationships and following through on actions.