

The Process of Collaboration

“What is most important at this juncture is the recognition that both within the nonprofit world itself and across the sometimes blurry boundaries of the nonprofit, corporate, and public sectors, entities of various types are engaging in collaborative activity with increasing frequency in order to achieve mission enhancement and greater organizational effectiveness” (Yankey & Willen, 2002).

The following is a summary of the collaboration framework as outlined by Russell M. Linden in *Working Across Boundaries*. In this work, Linden creates a detailed account of what organizations should expect to encounter as they engage in collaborative efforts.

- Getting the basics right (Chapter 5):
 - The parties have a shared purpose or goal that they care about but cannot achieve on their own
 - The Parties want to pursue a collaborative solution now and are willing to contribute something to achieve it.
 - The right people are at the table.
 - The parties have an open, credible process: Joint ownership, agreed-upon norms or ground rules, knowledge of each other, transparency, skillful convening.
 - The initiative has a champion, someone with credibility and clout who makes this a high priority.

- Forming open, trusting relationships among key actors (Chapter 6):
 - Parties have to share information, labor, and credit, follow up on tasks, and stand together.
 - Consider holding partnering workshops to establish long-term relationships between parties and help master the basics of collaboration.
 - Army Corps of Engineers uses the partnering approach.
 - Relationships are the glue to collaborative efforts.

- Developing high stakes (Chapter 7):
 - The task at hand is very important to employees and outside stakeholders.
 - The results are visible to others.
 - The consequences of getting it right or wrong are large.
 - Will be felt directly both those doing the work in the near term.
 - Raising the stakes involves:
 - Helping others develop a line of sight.
 - Developing a sense of urgency.
 - Making current performance visible and accountability real.
 - Identifying a higher purpose.

- Creating a constituency for collaboration (Chapter 8):
 - A group who strongly believe that a collaborative effort is in their interest, who want to support it, and who have influence over the parties involved.
 - Create visible signs of success and share credit widely.
 - Set clear, simple goals that resonate with the public; invite outside groups to help and monitor progress.
 - Use symbols to reinforce the partnership's power.
 - Involve stakeholders at every step.

- Educate stakeholders to see the connection between collaboration and their self-interest.
- Think politically, without becoming political.
- Building collaborative leadership (Chapter 9):
 - As opposed to hierarchical leadership, collaborative leaders have no formal authority over their peers.
 - Use collaboration as a vehicle for joint planning, policy development, and resource allocation.
 - Recognize the interdependence of each agency's mission, and respect each one's autonomy, diversity, and cultural values.
 - Initiate programs that are outcome-based, comprehensive, and preventive.
 - Diminish or eliminate categorical, narrowly defined programs.
 - Support replication of programs and strategies that demonstrate measurable positive outcomes.
 - Use collaborative resource allocation strategies, including pooling of funds and development of joint budgets.
 - Use accountability measures and benchmarks to track client well-being.
 - Foster creativity, mutual trust, and respect among all partners and the community.
 - Four qualities of collaborative leaders:
 - Resolute and driven -- especially about collaboration.
 - Modest -- a strong but measured ego.
 - Inclusive -- uses "pull" much more than "push".
 - Collaborative mind-set-- sees connections to something larger.

“Collaboration and barter,” by Renee Irvin in *Financing nonprofits* (2007), provides a useful list of diagnostic questions that nonprofit managers should consider when evaluating the benefits of collaboration:

1. What problems are common concerns for all organizations? Are the organizations in the same field, or do they produce different (complementary) “products”?
2. What potentially shared inputs are used by each individual organization to carry out their mission? This might include fixed costs such as rent and variable costs such as materials, staff time, volunteer labor, community publicizing, and organizing.
3. If two or more organizations worked together on one project, would it save labor (paid or unpaid), materials, or overhead (fixed) costs?
4. If potential cost savings are insignificant, would collaboration result in a higher quality, more effective, or longer lasting solution for the issue at hand? A grant maker might be particularly interested in collaboration that results in a multisector effort to address a complex problem in the community.
5. Would it be time consuming just to get the organizations to coordinate their efforts on a project? Are the potential collaborators already familiar and comfortable with one another?

Ivry, Renee A. (2007). Collaboration and barter. In D. R. Young (Ed.), *Financing nonprofits: Putting theory into practice* (pp. 207-226). Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

Linden, Russell M. (2002). *Working across boundaries: Making collaboration work in government and nonprofit organizations*. San-Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Yankey, John A., & Willen, Carol K. (2010). Collaboration and Strategic Alliances. In D. O. Renz (Ed.), *Handbook of nonprofit leadership and management* (3rd Edition) (pp. 375-400). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.