Can This Collaboration Be Saved?

Twenty factors that can make or break any group effort

By Paul Mattessich

If you've been part of a collaboration that really worked, you know how powerful that can be. You were part of a group that accomplished important things together. In the process, you developed strong new working relationships for yourself and your organization. You helped to create a community climate in which people see that it is possible for very different groups and individuals to come together and get things done.

On the other hand, if you've been involved in a collaboration that stalled or – worse yet – crashed and burned, you know how frustrating and wasteful that can be. Wouldn't it be nice to know in advance which way the collaboration will go?

Collaboration is a large and growing part of the landscape for community development work. Often it makes sense and leads to good results. Yet the timing is not always right, nor the ingredients in place for a successful collaborative effort. Although there's no foolproof

way to predict the outcome of any undertaking that involves people and organizations working together, a few basic checkpoints can be quite revealing. And if you're already involved in a collaborative effort, these same checkpoints can help your group recognize strengths and work on weaknesses.

In the sense we are discussing here, collaboration goes beyond informal cooperation or occasional coordination of efforts. It is a long-term, well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals. It involves genuine sharing of authority, accountability, resources and rewards. There is a need, a crisis, or an opportunity. Partners come together to accomplish something that they cannot do alone.

Recently we re-examined hundreds of scientific studies about successful and not-so-successful collaborations to learn what made the difference. In the new edition of *Collaboration: What Makes It Work*, we pinpoint 20 factors that have been shown time after time to make or break a group effort. Those factors fall into six general categories: general environment, membership, structure and

process, communication, purpose and resources.

Environment

If your community has a rich history of collaboration or cooperation, you have a head start. If not, or if the experience has been negative, you'll need to spend time to educate, shape expectations and develop buy-in among your potential partners, funders and others whose support will be crucial to your success.

Another environmental factor is the reputation of your collaborative group – and each of its members. If the community does not know or trust your collective reliability, competence and intentions, it will take time and effort to establish that trust.

Think also about the political and social climate for the things you want to accomplish. General support, or at least lack of opposition, means you will spend less time trying to overcome roadblocks. That is not to say that your collaboration is doomed if you set out to challenge community norms or address controversial issues; it just means you need to think realistically about what you can accomplish.

Membership

You need representation from the groups that will influence the success of your work or be affected by it. At the same time, you need to keep the size and breadth of the group manageable.

Each member must clearly understand how the collaboration is going to benefit them and help them to accomplish their goals. This sense of self-interest must be strong enough to offset the costs of collaboration, such as extra time and effort and some loss of autonomy.

Right from the start, the group needs to devote energy and time to developing mutual respect, understanding and trust. This starts with common courtesy and taking time to learn about the others around the table – both the individuals and the organizations they represent. Likewise, both the individual and the organization must be ready and willing to compromise. There is no way that the many decisions of a collaborative group can perfectly fit the preferences of each member.

Structure and Process

Our research found no magic

formula for the way that successful collaborative groups should organize themselves, make decisions, and get work done. However, we did find it is essential that all the partners understand and "buy into" the process and structure that the group will use. You will also need to remain somewhat flexible and open, able to adjust your methods or structures to meet the demands of a project.

Yet that flexibility should not be confused with a fuzzy or vague sense of how things work. In successful collaborations, the partners clearly understand what is expected of them and what they can expect from the group. These things are discussed directly, not assumed. A letter of agreement can be helpful, spelling out the roles, rights, and responsibility of each partner, and perhaps even stating the basic values and philosophy of the group.

The strongest collaborations do not involve just one "layer" of each organization – for instance, only top leadership or only front-line staff. Each partner should somehow involve people at all levels of the organization – not necessarily as part of the core group that meets regularly, but in a meaningful role.

Another important strength of effective collaboration is adaptability – the group's ability to sustain itself in the midst of major changes in the community or in its member organizations. Ultimately, the group must be willing to adjust even its fundamental mission, vision and goals to match new conditions or new learning.

And finally, understand that there are different stages in any collaboration. The most intense need for funding and staff time often occurs during the start-up phase and, later, when you are actually implementing the plans that you have developed. In the early phases of collaboration, modest and short-term goals can help to cement trust and build your collective strength and reputation. Later, an experienced and successful collaboration may be ready for more complex, large-scale ventures. It's important to "pace yourself."

Communication

Successful collaborative groups communicate often and well. They keep each other up to date, discuss issues openly, and consistently convey an appropriate level of information

to people outside the group. Communication styles and methods should reflect the diversity of the group. A large or complex collaborative group may even need staff dedicated to keeping communication flowing.

Personal connections also produce a more cohesive group. Communication cannot just happen via memos, email and newsletters. Members need to get to know each other and keep in touch.

Purpose

If your group's common purpose is something broad like "affordable housing," you need specific, realistic goals that lead in that direction. Some of those goals can be big and long-term, but some should also be immediate and doable. Your momentum and strength as a group will come from a progression of successes, perhaps quite modest in the beginning.

The group might or might not begin with the same vision of what you hope to accomplish, but a shared vision is needed very early in the process. And that vision must be unique – it cannot be identical to the mission and goals of any of the partner

organizations. If the partners in a collaborative effort are actually groups that are competing to achieve the same goals, the shared ownership of true collaboration will be virtually impossible. In that situation, consider working together in some less demanding way, such as coordinating or cooperating on certain activities.

Resources

If you've read this far, or if you've been involved in genuine collaboration, you know that it does not come cheap. It takes substantial, consistent funding and staffing. Each partner organization must be prepared to contribute, according to its means, substantial staff hours and skills, fundraising efforts, in-kind support and funds. Putting off the resource question for later can be a fatal mistake.

Another "resource" that cannot be overlooked is leadership. Leaders of successful collaborative efforts have strong organizing and interpersonal skills. They are knowledgeable about the topic the group is working on. They carry out their role with serious attention and with fairness. These and other strengths earn them the respect and "followership" of the

collaborative partners.

"But I'm not a 'process' person"

Sometimes it seems easier and more productive to march toward a solution than to spend time forming alliances and getting to know each other. That may work with some tasks. But it's not the way to work on something complicated that no one person or entity can fix alone.

Collaborations arise from the need to solve complex problems. They work only if and when participants put time and energy into their relationships with each other. You can't throw 10 people in a room and expect them to dash out the door a few hours later to fix a bedeviling problem. First, they must learn to work together. They need to take stock of their strengths and weaknesses as a group and their place within the community. This requires patience, honesty and common courtesy, which with time and effort will grow into mutual respect and trust. Our research shows that, far from wasting time, these are critical steps to solving the issues that galvanized the group in the first place.

Of course, collaborations need to

focus on results. That's the whole point of collaborating. However, if you want to arrive at solutions that are real and lasting, you need to get there together.

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Paul Mattessich is executive director of the Wilder Research Center in Saint Paul, MN, and author of Collaboration: What Makes It Work (2002), Community-Building: What Makes It Work (1997), and The Manager's Guide to Program Evaluation (2003). A free online version of the Wilder Collaboration Questionnaire can be found at www.wilder.org/research.

Resources:

The following books on collaboration are available for purchase at www.wilder.org/pubs, or call 1-800-274-6024   1-800-274-6024   . In addition, a free resource list of more than 200 books and articles on collaboration can be found at www.wilder.org/pubs.

Collaboration: What Makes It Work, Second Edition. Collaboration Handbook:

Creating, Sustaining, and Enjoying the Journey.
The Nimble Collaboration: Fine-Tuning Your Collaboration for Lasting Success.
The Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory.

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