



Are we ready to collaborate?

FACT SHEET 7

© ARACY 2010

Collaboration brings organisations together to achieve something that cannot be delivered by any organisation's individual efforts. For collaboration to be effective, participating organisations have to let go of some of their autonomy, share resources and power, and be willing to work for the collective good. For many organisations, making such a shift in functioning is not easy. Consider the following questions before committing your organisation to a collaborative endeavour.

Do we really need to do this?

Previous Fact Sheets¹ have explained that there are a number of ways for organisations to work together. Before forming or joining a collaboration an organisation should assess whether collaboration is the best approach to addressing the identified problem. Think about the benefits you expect participation in the collaboration to bring to your organisation, and whether you could achieve those gains without joining the collaboration. Although the primary purpose of a collaboration is to achieve collective goals, each participant also expects that the collaboration's actions will contribute to their organisational goals.

Are we open and willing to change?

Being part of a collaboration usually demands or results in some degree of change in the way organisations work and their institutional relationships, policies, programs and funding streams. Assess whether your organisation is willing to enable and sustain the systems change necessary for the collaboration to thrive and prosper. Does it have the organisational structures, management commitment and resources needed to commit to long-term collaborative action?

If your organisation tends to resist change, or may be unable to generate the type or degree of change required, be certain this can be overcome before you commit to a collaboration.

Do we have both the capability and capacity to work collaboratively?

Collaborations require considerable investments of staff effort and contribution of funds and materials that could be used beneficially elsewhere within the participating organisations. Assess your organisation's capacity to contribute sufficient resources to the collaboration. Further, since the return on these investments will probably take some time to accrue, consider whether your organisation is able and prepared to plan for a long-term commitment.

Collaboration requires a particular set of skills, which are often quite different to those needed in everyday working situations. Working effectively across organisational and disciplinary boundaries calls for expertise in relationship building, facilitation and negotiation, as well as the ability to take part in and shape shared planning and action. Organisations that

The Advancing Collaboration Practice program has been established to support ARACY's work building cross-sector collaborations capable of implementing action that addresses the complex problems impacting the wellbeing of children and young people in Australia. The program builds stakeholder capabilities to establish and manage long-term joint working relationships and collaborative efforts. **For more information please contact ARACY on 08 9476 7800**

1 The series of Fact Sheets is available on the [ARACY website](#)

have experience working in successful collaborative arrangements are generally able to bring those skills and experiences to new initiatives. When considering participation in a collaboration organisations must conduct a collaboration skills assessment, including a review of their previous behaviour within a collaborative endeavour.

Time is a critical collaboration resource. This includes both the time invested in building new relationships and sustaining existing ones and time redirected from other organisational activities to the collaborative activities. Collaborations also demand a high level of intellectual energy from the contributing staff members (organisational representatives), which may reduce their focus on their parent organisation's activities. Your organisation needs to weigh its needs against the needs of the collaboration and decide whether the time staff members spend on collaborative activities will be worth the investment.

Are we able and willing to delegate decision making?

It is important that the individual representatives of organisations in collaborations have sufficient decision-making authority. The level of each individual member's decision-making authority in their parent organisation is indicative of the organisation's broader commitment to the collaboration's purpose. In making agreements, deliberating issues, negotiating interests or taking action, a representative's ability to directly make decisions is critical. This does not mean that organisational representatives will not have to consult or confer with their parent organisations from time to time. Indeed, the support of the parent organisations is critical to the sustainability of the collaboration.

A representative's authority should be commensurate with the issues that the collaboration is addressing: the higher the stakes, the higher the representative's authority should be. Organisations must accept that their representatives need to be accountable to the collaboration as well as to the organisation. This dual responsibility is likely to cause some tensions between organisational and collaborative expectations and functions. Organisational representatives need the explicit support of their parent organisations to legitimately work outside of the parent organisation's boundaries.

Are we willing to have our organisation exposed to the scrutiny of other participants?

Ongoing interaction and continuous time together at the collaborative table invariably leads to critical examination of each participating organisation's values, interests and efficacy. Organisations must be prepared to accept a frank exchange of views and engage in discussions with the intent to foster improved outcomes rather than 'score points' against others. It is very clear which participants are contributing to the collaboration and which are 'fence sitting', that is, not actively contributing to and yet benefiting from the collaboration process. Such action will often undermine the effectiveness of the collaborative effort and quickly damage an organisation's reputation. Each organisation and its representative must commit, up front, to actively contribute and share with other participants in the collaboration.

Are we prepared to hold ourselves accountable to collaborative agreements?

When an organisation joins a collaboration, there is an implicit expectation that it will genuinely strive to achieve the collective goals. The key question for an organisation to consider is whether it has sufficient and appropriate structures and processes in place to support and sustain the collaboration. As indicated previously, this means that member organisations must be willing and able to make changes required within their own organisations to ensure the collaboration will be successful. Each organisation must balance its organisational priorities and commitments against those of the collaboration.

Conclusion

Most collaborations will face challenges. Simply forming a collaboration does not make a problem immediately disappear or easy to resolve. Collaborations provide an opportunity for cross-organisational and cross-sectoral relationships but also may create greater complexity and uncertainty for member organisations. The potential benefits, and challenges, of collaboration must be weighed against the certainties of business as usual.

Given both the advantages and risks, no organisation should enter lightly into creating, or participating in, a collaboration. Your organisation's ongoing viability and credibility depend on its ability to understand and know what to look for in a collaboration; determine its level of commitment, capacity and willingness to act; and assess internal tolerances for participation and risk. For a collaboration to be successful, member organisations cannot be 'fence sitters'; each must have the capacity, and be willing, to make a strong commitment to the process.

If your organisation can effectively negotiate various interests, identify and act on trade offs, and generally work in a collaborative spirit, your contribution to a collaboration can achieve both your organisational goals and the collective goals.

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

ARACY is a national non-profit organisation working to create better futures for all Australia's children and young people. Despite Australia being a wealthy, developed country, many aspects of the health and wellbeing of our young people have been declining. ARACY was formed to reverse these trends, by preventing and addressing the major problems affecting our children and young people. ARACY tackles these complex issues through building collaborations with researchers, policy makers and practitioners from a broad range of disciplines. We share knowledge and foster evidence-based solutions.

About the authors of this fact sheet

Dr Robyn Keast has an extensive background as a practitioner, policy officer and manager within the public and non-government sectors in Australia, New Zealand and Canada. She works with the Queensland University of Technology as a Senior Lecturer with interests including networked arrangements, network analysis and innovation, global trends in business management and government/business relations. In addition to her internationally recognised research, Robyn is a practitioner, having led and consulted on a wide variety of collaboration projects.

Dr Myrna P. Mandell is Professor Emeritus at California State University, Northridge, an Adjunct Faculty at the School of Management at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia and a Visiting Faculty at Southern Cross University in New South Wales, Australia. Her work includes articles and chapters on a number of different facets of networks, including: how to organise and manage networks, performance measures for networks, citizen participation in networks and leadership in networks. She is currently involved in research on networks in the international arena.

enquiries@aracy.org.au

www.aracy.org.au

Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

Canberra

Juliana House
10 Bowes Street
Woden ACT 2606
Postal address:
PO Box 25
Woden ACT 2606
Phone: 02 6232 4503

Perth

Dumas House
2 Havelock Street
West Perth WA 6005
Postal address:
PO Box 1360
West Perth WA 6872
Phone: 08 9476 7800

Melbourne

University of Melbourne
Department of Pediatrics
Royal Children's Hospital
Flemington Road
Parkville Vic 3052
Phone: 03 9345 5145

Sydney

Level 9
117 Clarence Street
Sydney NSW 2000
GPO Box 10500
Sydney NSW 2001
Phone: 02 9085 7247