



When to collaborate?

FACT SHEET 4

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There are many benefits of collaboration, as outlined in ARACY's fact sheet 'Why collaborate?'. But collaboration is only one form of joint working relationship. It is most effective in particular circumstances and can be challenging to implement, hence it is not appropriate in every situation. The challenge for individuals and organisations wanting to work together is determining when to use collaboration and when to choose a simpler approach.

The Relationship Continuum presented in ARACY's 'What is collaboration?' fact sheet outlined three progressively more intense types of working relationship. These three types of relationship are called the 3Cs: cooperation, coordination and collaboration. All three approaches are useful and can be very effective. However, each has different purposes, is best used in different situations and, as you move up the continuum from cooperation to collaboration, presents progressively higher or riskier stakes for participants.

In many circumstances, it is sufficient just to share information, expertise and referrals on an ongoing basis. In other contexts rather than forging a new collaboration it may be beneficial to develop more efficient ways of working together by better aligning existing resources and effort, eg using taskforces and inter-agency committees. Equally, there are

some situations where single agency action remains appropriate.

This fact sheet presents criteria that can be used to decide whether to form a collaboration or whether one of the other forms of joint working relationship on the 3C continuum would be more appropriate.

When to collaborate?

How, then, does a project manager or practitioner determine when collaboration is most appropriate and when other approaches to working together should be applied? Research¹ suggests that the decision to collaborate or not should be informed by:

- the nature and complexity of the presenting problem/s
- the sense of interdependency between involved agencies and individual members
- the willingness of members and parent organisations to engage in and sponsor new thinking and behaviours
- the level of collective commitment to change action.

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 Gray, B. (1989). *Finding common ground for multi-party problems*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass;
Keast, R, Brown, K, Mandell, MP and Woolcock, G. (2004). Network Structures: Working Differently and Changing Expectations. *Public Administration Review* 64(3):363-371.

Although each of these factors is inter-related, for ease of understanding they are explained separately below.

Level of complexity

Collaborations are formed to solve complex problems. Complex problems comprise multiple, interconnected elements that are hard to untangle. They defy precise problem definition, do not have clear solutions, cut across policy and service areas and resist solutions offered by single agencies. Since they are beyond the capacity of any one organisation or sector, complex problems require a more holistic and integrated approach that brings together the resources, knowledge, skills and capabilities of multiple organisations and people to devise solutions. Problems that don't meet these criteria can most likely be tackled through a cooperative or coordinated method. The more complex a problem the more likely collaboration is the best approach.

Sense of interdependency

Collaboration is best used by organisations that recognise they need to work together – synchronising their time, knowledge and resources – to meet their individual and collective goals. This interdependence is based on the realisation that collaboration will achieve a better outcome than can be achieved by an organisation working alone.

However, organisations that share a common goal, or want to address the same problem, often do not seek exactly the same outcomes. Each participant may have a different agenda, for example financial security, increased profile, development of knowledge and capacity or the opportunity to expand services, but they realise they cannot achieve their desired outcome unless they work with the other organisations in the collaboration. Hence each participant is not just *dependent* on the others, they are *interdependent*.

When deciding what sort of joint relationship is best, project managers should consider the depth of interdependency between organisations: the greater the interdependency the more likely a collaborative approach is required.

Willingness to change

Collaboration is used to change existing systems and processes or to pursue a new creation or reform of some type. Collaboration enables – and requires – the participating organisations to develop a shared purpose and approach to addressing the issue or problem. Collaboration requires members to share not just resources, but also power and authority. Each participant must be willing to change their attitudes and working processes to consider their partners and the new working relationships. They also need to reconsider and redefine their various roles within the broader sector.

Systems change is a very risky proposition for all participants in a new working relationship. For a collaboration to be effective, each member must accept the need to change the way they have operated previously. Participating organisations must be willing to demonstrate their 'buy-in' and legitimise changes before they can occur. Their demonstrated commitment to change and to sharing power and resources is fundamental to a collaboration's success.

The volume and level of change required for collaboration will not always be appreciated and will sometimes be met with resistance from within the organisation and even from stakeholders. Project managers must carefully assess an organisation's capacity to change and adapt to the new working environment to determine if it will be an effective participant in a collaborative relationship.

Level of collective commitment

Collaboration is not just about organisations reaching shared agreement on what they will work on. It requires participants to recognise the overriding need to provide the resources necessary for the collaboration to be successful, stay with and champion the collaboration's initiatives, and most importantly embed and sustain the new ways of working within individual organisations and the collaboration itself. Collaboration does not happen by magic! It requires members to make a collective commitment to change the ways they operate².

2 Mandell, MP. (1994). Managing Interdependencies through program structures: A revised paradigm. *American Review of Public Administration* 24(91):99–121.

Collaboration does not always result in the expected gains; therefore, members must have high tolerance for risk and be committed to pushing through problems and advocating for both the initiatives and the collaborative process. Strong relationships are needed to maintain this commitment and facilitate participation that, in turn, builds a sense of ownership among members. Project managers must consider the level of commitment their organisations are willing to contribute to any joint working effort, particularly if they are considering forming a collaboration.

Conclusion

While the benefits of collaboration are many, developing an effective collaboration is complex and challenging. Selecting the most appropriate relationship for working together requires the potential members to assess and define the problem, be clear and in agreement about what it is that they hope to accomplish by working together and be realistic about their organisational capacity to follow through. To optimise the advantages of collaboration over other 'joined-up' or integrative approaches requires commitment and discipline. Despite the rhetoric, collaboration should be undertaken only after careful consideration and acceptance of the four elements detailed above, at a minimum.

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

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