



Collaboration—Getting going!

FACT SHEET 6

© ARACY 2010

In the start-up phase of a collaboration there is a set of activities that should be completed to ensure the collaboration is properly structured and managed to achieve its purpose. The founding members must clarify the purpose and create the structure of the collaboration; determine the membership composition; set the terms of engagement and agreed outcomes; build functional relationships; and determine how the collaborative group will be organised and managed.

Clarify the purpose and ensure collaboration is the correct approach

Collaboration can be a risky undertaking and should not be entered into lightly. It is important that members of the collaboration have an agreed common purpose or understanding of what they expect to achieve. Further, members must agree that collaboration is the best way to accomplish their goals.

Establishing an agreed or shared purpose is different to broadly scoping a problem or reaching universal agreement on the problem confronting members. It requires members to craft a clear, specific and unambiguous statement of the purpose of the collaboration. That is, clarifying exactly what is to be achieved and how should it be achieved.

A key part of this process is a genuine and informed exploration of alternatives for achieving the stated goals.

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**

Collaboration for the sake of collaboration is not enough; it is likely to lead to unsuccessful outcomes and may well negatively impact the relationship between partners. A range of options for joint working arrangements and actions to guide the process of matching purpose to structure have been presented in previous ARACY Fact Sheets (see www.aracy.org.au).

Determine collaboration membership

Having decided what is to be achieved, and that collaboration is the best mechanism to achieve it, the next step is to determine who should be involved and at what level. This involves identifying necessary participants and their resources (skills, knowledge and assets) and securing their buy-in (and the commitment of their parent organisation). It is also important that within the membership there are people who will actively champion the work of the collaboration through active engagement and support of projects. A careful assessment and enlistment of outside support (including relevant stakeholders) with sufficient clout, ie sponsors, is also necessary to make sure that the collaboration has the greatest chance for sustainability¹ over a long period of time.

1 Bryson, J. (1995). *Strategic Planning for public and nonprofit organizations*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Keast, R., Brown, K., Mandell, M. and Woolcock, G. (2004). Network structures: Working differently and changing expectations *Public Administration Review* 64 (3): 363–371

Negotiate terms of engagement and collaboration outcomes

In order to achieve joint goals, collaboration members need to achieve a level of consensus on how they will work together (the 'terms of engagement') and what they will work towards (the outcomes). The terms of engagement are the rules, standards, roles and behaviours that guide the way the members will interact with each other. Examples include treating members and their opinions with respect, and acknowledging differences but agreeing to work together on common concerns. Sanctions may be specified in the terms to encourage cooperation with agreed principles and practices. Typical sanctions could include exclusion from the collaboration, restriction of influence or social isolation from other members.

Once the terms of engagement are established, members engage in ongoing rounds of dialogue, discussion and negotiation to identify interests and determine agreed goals. Through this process decisions and directions are shaped and reshaped, and issues are framed in different ways, helping members to interpret problems from different perspectives, analyse information and develop solutions. These ongoing interactions enable members to jointly agree on the way forward and the goals to be achieved.

Build and nurture relationships

Effective relationships are central to successful collaboration. A relationship is a bond or a sense of connectedness between people that enables interactions to take place and work to be completed. Relationships take time and effort to establish, nurture and sustain. There are a number of informal and formal processes that can be drawn upon to strengthen and deepen the essential bonds of trust and confidence necessary for collaborative action.

Some useful informal relationship building methods that can impact on members' perceptions about one another include shared meals, organised social events, team and trust building retreats and other activities that focus less on the business of the collaboration and member interests and more on helping members to set power and perception differences aside and

see one another as real people. Site visits to other members' organisations can further enhance members' perceptions and understandings of issues confronting them and the limitations of their action/contributions. As well as establishing formal rules, roles and routines to guide collaborative action, other formalised mechanisms such as effective meeting procedures and decision-making processes, including the appointment of skilled facilitators and training programs, have been found to be effective for building relationships.

Organise and manage

Collaborations operate on the basis of collective rather than single authority. Hence a collaboration's organisational structure must reflect this principle yet still allow members to manage actions to achieve outcomes. There are a number of well-accepted organising structures that could be adopted or adapted to best suit each collaboration's needs. Some management options include:

- self-governing general assembly, based on designated work groups or action teams
- a lead organisational structure, where one institution is nominally 'in charge' and responsible for managing the
- project but the terms of equal partnership apply, ie shared direction setting and decision making
- a core administrative structure, in which there is a separate, dedicated administrative body that represents all members and is responsible for the implementation and management of the project's direction
- a collaboration manager, working under the direction of the collaboration members

These five activities form a platform for effective collaborations. Evidence from the literature and from successful collaborations (see the case studies below) shows that time and effort spent planning, organising and building agreement in the set-up phase is essential to forming a collaboration that will achieve members' collective goals.

The steps in action: case studies

The Sacramento Water Forum and the Services Integration Project (SIP) Goodna are two good case studies of the application of these early steps in collaboration². In both cases members spent time understanding the issues to be addressed before determining the purpose and collaborative process. They were strategic in composing their membership, successfully drawing on the efforts of both champions and sponsors to develop and sustain their collaborative processes and secure desired outcomes.

Both projects highlight the importance of relationship building and processes to support collaborative working. Participants in both projects realised from the outset that better relationships were essential to achieve their shared goals, but that achieving and sustaining good relationships would not be easy. To overcome the problems caused by their previously adversarial way of working, all SIP members participated in a Graduate Certificate in Inter-professional Leadership course, which taught them how to relate to each other, work together and capitalise on their collective capabilities. In the Water Forum an external consultant used interest-based negotiation methods to help members better understand and appreciate each other, while SIP used a specialist facilitator to encourage dialogue and consensus building as a key mechanism for achieving goals.

2 Connick, S. (2006). *The Sacramento Water Forum: A Case Study*. Institute of Urban & Regional Development, IURD Working Paper Series 2006-06, University of California, Berkeley. <http://repositories.edlib.org/urd/wps/WP2006-06>; Keast et al, (2004). Network structures: Working differently and changing expectations *Public Administration Review* 64 (3): 363–371; <http://www.uq.edu.au/boilerhouse/goodna-sip/>

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