Power and collaboration

Fact sheet 13

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Generally defined as the ability to influence, control or resist the activities of others, power is an important, yet often unrecognised element of collaboration.

Power means different things to different people. For some, it lies in an organisation’s ability to control relationships with others, so activities and outcomes align more directly with their purpose. Some regard the power of joint action as an important outcome of productive relations between organisations. For others, power means using the collaboration process to engage and empower groups not generally included in decision-making processes.

The differing perspectives identified above have led to three main considerations for power in collaborations: power over, power with/to and power for. Each of these must be considered and addressed to secure genuine and effective collaboration.

Collaborative power types

Power over strives to gain the upper hand to secure control over resources brought to the collaboration. Power over can be enacted via force, coercion or threat, for example, loss of funding. This pursuit of bargaining power denotes an adversarial, rather than collaborative, approach. It is an approach where the collaboration process is regarded purely as a tool to be used to benefit the needs of one organisation rather than the whole. Numerous studies have identified a powerful stakeholder, frequently government, seeking to exert power over the collaboration agenda at the expense of the collective.

Power over can be contained by assessing relationships within the collaboration and identifying who holds power (legitimacy, information, critical resources etc). A management strategy can be developed to keep the powerful relationship at arm’s length or to strengthen its collaborative focus.

Power with or power to, lies in the ability of a collaboration to achieve its ends by drawing on the individual and collective capabilities/capacities of members. Tapping into combined intellect, resources, knowledge and persistence provides the power to accomplish things with others. By relying on one another the power resides within the group, not with individuals. Power with/to is best facilitated by understanding the processes taking place within the collaboration.


The ARACY Networks have been established to support our work in building cross-sector collaborations capable of implementing action that addresses the complex problems impacting the wellbeing of children and youth in Australia. The six Networks focus on exchanging knowledge and facilitating long-term working relationships and collaborative efforts between sectors and agencies. For more information please contact ARACY on 02 6248 2400
collaboration and using existing diagnostic tools and processes (see, for example Fact Sheet 10) to build on, strengthen and embed shared power as a core operating norm or value.

*Power for* extends collaborative membership and decision-making to stakeholders generally not included in the process. This integrative approach is based purely on the concept that it is "the right thing to do".

It builds capacity for underpowered stakeholders, allowing them to participate at a higher level.

Although presented as separate categories, in reality most collaborations experience, to varying degrees, each of the three power types. This means in most collaborative endeavours there is potential for the use of some force, some mutual exchange (or negotiation) and some additional inclusion.

**Personal and positional power types**

Two additional types of power can impact on inter-organisational working at the micro level: personal and positional.4

*Personal power* lies in the characteristics of individuals. These characteristics can be used to influence others. It can comprise expertise, referent authority, access to information and/or a network of important connections. Expert power comes when a person holds knowledge or task expertise that is valued by other organisations or individuals. Referent power is based on the individual's ability to generate admiration and loyalty which can be leveraged to influence others. Charismatic leaders have referent power because they are able to convince people of their visions and are perceived by their followers as agents of change.

The power of important connections, networking, lies in who you know, vertically and horizontally, both within and outside an organisation and in how these connections can be used.

*Information power* is created by the level of need others have for reliable information. Whether sourced via the organisation hierarchy, or via the employee 'grapevine,' the person in the organisation with the most reliable information can be considered powerful.

*Positional Power* is conferred on people by the position they hold within an organisation or society and often includes some elements of legitimacy, coercion and reward. Legitimate power exists because organisations assign certain powers to individuals so they can do their jobs effectively. Reward power is based on the individual's ability to reward desirable behaviour by, for example, pay increases, promotions, work schedules, status symbols and recognition awards. By contrast, coercive power is based on the ability of the individual to sanction (punish) or prevent someone from obtaining desirable rewards. Rewards and punishment are powerful motivational tools. Leaders are generally better served by the exercise of reward power than by the exercise of coercive power.

**Conclusion**

Power is a tool which can be used for positive or negative outcomes. For effective collaboration, all types of power must be identified, acknowledged, continually assessed and managed so as to find a balance which suits all collaboration members.

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Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) is a national, non-government organisation which focuses on bringing together researchers, policymakers and practitioners, to turn the best evidence for ‘what works’ for child and youth wellbeing into practical, preventative action to benefit all young Australians. We are making this happen by creating collaborative opportunities, through our Networks, events, state convenor activities and regular publications, that work to break down traditional barriers in addressing the major problems affecting our young people.

About the authors of this fact sheet

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