Collaborative competencies/capabilities

Collaboration comprises four core components: governance and structure; systems and processes; managing and leveraging relationships; and people and culture. For genuine collaboration to occur each of these must be addressed and be successful. These components operate in concert to create a collaborative model. It is, however, increasingly considered that it is the competencies and capabilities of collaboration members which provide the real scaffolding for these elements to be enacted.

Research has distilled a core set of competencies and capabilities for collaborative practice; an ability to work skilfully across boundaries, to frame the operating context in a way that prepares members for joint working, and the nimbleness to work with an emerging set of norms, roles and values.

Excellent collaborators have the ability to mobilise and energise others to create a common vision to solve problems. They facilitate the work of others, can read a situation as it unfolds and are instinctively resourceful in that they can identify and tap into the array of assets held by members. Successful collaborators listen and take time to learn about the problem before launching into solutions. In so doing, they ‘step into others’ shoes’ and try to appreciate the various perspectives and experiences of members.

The best collaborators can identify and constructively resolve conflict. They have excellent communication and group facilitation skills and are capable of big picture thinking, modelling collaborative behaviour and can coach others to work in more collective styles. They can build coalitions around issues by identifying the right mix of people to come together and by subtly influencing partnership formation, and can leverage these relationships to achieve outcomes. Importantly, they know when to exercise ‘political savvy’, to identify and understand the internal and external politics that may impact on the work of the collaboration. They can align top-down policies and bottom-up issues, know who to include in the collaboration, and can gain the support of people who can legitimise the effort.

Add to all that, mediation and negotiating skills, (especially interest-based negotiation which encourages win/win outcomes), risk analysis and strategic thinking and managing task assignment and responsibilities, and you have all the essential elements of the collaborative tool box.

Many of the personal attributes of emotional intelligence may also have strong resonance with collaboration, for example; trustworthiness, sense of humour, empathy, integrity, comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty, a dynamic or charismatic personality and a strong commitment to the collaborative process.6

Table 1 categorises the core competencies/capabilities and characteristics into four fields. Collectively these four fields provide the nucleus for collaborative practice.

The set of competencies and capabilities necessary for effective collaboration is extensive and can take time to develop. Collaborative capabilities are generally very different to the set of competencies and capabilities enshrined in most work programs and are rarely valued or rewarded at the same level as conventional performance modes. For collaboration to become core practice, organisations may need to review their modus operandi. New human resources policies may be needed, and a revised training agenda may be required with an emphasis on skills and practices that help people and organisations to work together, including, for example, developing a greater sense and commitment to ‘the whole’ or the collective, rather than to single agencies’ approaches.

The skills and characteristics of collaborators are different to the norm. While some people inherently possess collaborative competencies and characteristics, they can be learnt if members are willing to step outside the comfort zones of usual practice.7

Everyday skills used to manage public and non-profit agency connections are also transferable to collaborative work, especially with regard to the implementation stages. For example, managing human and financial resources, managing the structure and rules that guide operations, and designing and implementing effective communication, information and strategies are common in both hierarchical and collaborative contexts.8 The challenge is translating these everyday skills to a collaborative context which is inherently more complex, fragile and idiosyncratic than conventional organisational settings and therefore difficult to control.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Getting things done through others</th>
<th>Analysis and planning</th>
<th>Driving the process</th>
<th>Personal attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>Listening and learning</td>
<td>Vision setting</td>
<td>Able to ‘read’ interactions and exchanges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship skills</td>
<td>Problem assessment</td>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Trustworthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build and maintain</td>
<td>Strategic planning</td>
<td>Linking and leveraging relationships</td>
<td>Sense of humour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing</td>
<td>Strategic relationship building</td>
<td>Getting ‘buy-in’ from members</td>
<td>Empathy (step in shoes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership skills</td>
<td>Work planning</td>
<td>Energis and mobilise</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process catalyst</td>
<td>Performance measurement and evaluation</td>
<td>Building coalitions</td>
<td>Patience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Process skills</td>
<td>Work planning</td>
<td>Modelling elaborate practice</td>
<td>Perseverance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change Management skills</td>
<td>Performance measurement and evaluation</td>
<td>Community building</td>
<td>Commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation skills (interest based)</td>
<td>Alignment of top down and bottom up processes</td>
<td>Managing relationships/ expectations</td>
<td>Cooperative spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deal constructively with conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td>Assignment of tasks and people</td>
<td>Strong personal presence</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Politically astute/savvy</td>
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</tbody>
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Conclusion
Collaborative practice is generating demand for collaborative competency. The difficulty is people with collaborative skills are not currently highly rewarded nor valued for these skills. This needs to be changed if collaborations are to become more effective. Working in collaborations will require trying out new skills and expanding current competencies, often in new settings, all of which will involve risk taking, but the reward will be the ability to achieve innovative and sustainable solutions to complex problems.

- New skills
- Shared leadership
- Shared skills development
- Shared roles and responsibilities
- Language

- Correct organisational structures form
- Right integration mechanism
- Alignment of top–down policies and bottom–up issues

- Performance measures
- Knowledge
- Establishing decision making
- Joint budgets and clear agreed goals; decision making processes; pooled funding

- Common language
- Shared (clear and agreed) goals/purpose
- Collegiality
- Agreed frames of reference
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 on ‘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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<td>Phone: 02 6248 2400</td>
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</tbody>
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