What is collaboration?

Collaborative practice is now central to the way we work, deliver services and produce innovations. Collaboration generally refers to individuals or organisations working together to address problems and deliver outcomes that are not easily or effectively achieved by working alone. Collaborative relationships are attractive to organisations because the synergies realised by combining effort and expertise produce benefits greater than those achieved through individual effort. The superior benefits created by combined effort are known as collaborative advantage.

Key drivers for a collaborative approach include:
- reduction of duplication and overlap
- accessing limited resources and expanding opportunities
- increasing efficiency and effectiveness
- organisational legitimacy
- resolving intractable social problems and completing complex projects.

Collaboration is part of a continuum of joint working relationships that are defined by:
- the intensity of the relationship
- communication flows and distribution of power between the participants
- length of relationship
- level of risk and reward.

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.

The continuum shown in Table 1 reviews the various characteristics of cooperation, coordination and collaboration. Collaboration has distinct characteristics that differentiate it from cooperation and coordination.1 Exploring the features of the 3Cs—cooperation, coordination and collaboration—highlights their different purposes, the level of integration between participants and the contributions required of participants in the relationship. This also provides a clearer understanding of what collaboration is and when it should and should not be used.2

**Cooperation:** In cooperative endeavours, the focus is primarily on sharing information and expertise. In this type of relationship participants are loosely connected so their contribution to the relationship is low. Each participant remains completely independent from the others. There are only minor changes in how each participant does business, but they have the advantage of learning from others and being able to modify the way they work. Cooperation is characterised by low

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levels of risk and reward since it emphasises reaching agreement to adjust specific actions rather than making changes to the organisation’s operations.

**Coordination** is based on a greater sense of interdependence between organisations. In coordinated approaches, the parties realise the need to work together to meet a set goal. This process requires participants to tightly align resources and effort. Although involved in set joint policies and programs, organisations retain control over their own operations. Coordination requires a higher level of contribution and commitment as well as stronger relationships between participants. These stronger relationships are often based on prior relationships and experiences between participants.

**Collaboration** is characterised by strong and highly interdependent relationships. Participants realise that to achieve outcomes they have to agree to radically alter the way they think, behave and operate. Collaboration is not about making adjustments at the periphery; it is about systems change and as such participants are involved in a high-risk, high-stakes and volatile environment that can produce results significantly different from those originally intended. This requires a high level of trust and extensive dialogue between participants, however, it can be highly rewarding for those willing to take the risks. For a collaboration to work there can no longer be ‘business as usual’. Collaboration demands participants forge new relationships and learn new ways of dealing with each other.

Each of these relationships has merit and usefulness. They should be viewed as complementary ways of achieving integration and joint working modes.

The challenge for practitioners is to match the type of joint working relationship with the identified purpose or required outcome of their project or program. If the goal is sharing information or expertise and adjusting actions, cooperative effort should be sufficient. Alternatively, if alignment of resources and activities is needed to achieve joint actions, then coordination becomes the appropriate mode. In this way, both cooperation and coordination are essentially about operating as normal but more efficiently. However, if working as usual is no longer sufficient, or the problem is so intractable that total systems change and innovation is required, collaboration is necessary.

Despite its many advantages collaboration is not a panacea to all social problems. It is one of a suite of possible strategies to enable individuals and organisations to work together more effectively. However, when implemented wisely, collaborations can be very powerful and effective mechanisms for social change.

**Table 1: Relationship continuum: characteristics of the 3Cs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COOPERATION</th>
<th>COORDINATION</th>
<th>COLLABORATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Loose connections, low trust</td>
<td>• Medium connections, work-based trust</td>
<td>• Dense interdependent connections, high trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tacit information sharing</td>
<td>• Structured communication flows, formalised project-based information sharing</td>
<td>• Frequent communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ad hoc communication flows</td>
<td>• Joint policies, programs and aligned resources</td>
<td>• Tactical information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Independent goals</td>
<td>• Semi-interdependent goals</td>
<td>• Systems change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Adapting to each other, or accommodating others’ actions and goals</td>
<td>• Power remains with parent organisations</td>
<td>• Collective resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Power remains with organisations</td>
<td>• Commitment and accountability to parent organisation and project</td>
<td>• Negotiated shared goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Resources remain with organisations</td>
<td>• Relational timeframe medium-based on prior projects</td>
<td>• Power is shared between organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Commitment and accountability to own organisation</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Commitment and accountability to network first then community and parent organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relational timeframe short</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Relational timeframe—long term (3 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Low risk/low reward</td>
<td></td>
<td>• High risk/high reward</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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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