

Effective Cross-Sector Collaboration

What Does the Research Tell Us?



NEXTPOINT
collaborative

Effective Cross-Sector Collaboration:

What Does the Research Tell Us?

Dianne Kinnon, Wanda Jamieson and Amy Jones

Nextpoint Collaborative, 2015

www.nextpointcollaborative.com

info@nextpointcollaborative.com

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Factors in Effective Cross-Sector Collaboration	1
Pre-Existing Conditions.....	1
Formative Stage Values Dialogue	1
Structures to Support Collaborative Work	2
Processes that Foster Collaboration.....	2
Commitment to Shared Activities	2
Pre-Existing Conditions	2
1. Historical Relationships	2
2. Degree of Difference among Partners.....	3
Formative Stage Values Dialogue	3
3. Initial and Ongoing Partner Selection	3
4. Identification of Common Values and Shared Vision.....	3
5. Championing Collaborative Practice.....	4
6. Co-creating/Planning Strategically.....	4
Structures to Support Collaborative Work	4
7. Developing Infrastructure.....	4
8. Integrative Leadership	5
9. Shared Decision Making/Mutual Accountability.....	5
10. Addressing Power Differences.....	5
Processes that Foster Collaboration	6
11. Relationship Building	6
12. Continual Learning.....	6
13. Adaptation.....	6
Commitment to Shared Activities	7
14. Carrying Out Agreed-On Tasks	7
15. Ongoing Monitoring and Reflection	7
Conclusion	7
Sources	8

Introduction

Practitioners and researchers are creating an ever-growing body of knowledge on the factors that enable effective cross-sector collaboration. In 2013, members of the [Nextpoint Collaborative](#) conducted an extensive review of journal articles in the non-profit management, business, and public administration fields in their work with the Carleton University Centre for Initiatives on Children, Youth and Community, and with Alberta's Sustainable Communities Initiative. In 2015, we updated the review and selected key articles that provide insight into the conditions, values, structures, processes, and implementation activities that help organizations work together effectively.

In this report, we offer a brief summary of the factors that, according to the research literature, foster effective cross-sector collaboration. We hope you will find the summary helpful for planning and implementing collaborative work practices. The factors, listed below, are described more fully in the sections that follow.

Factors in Effective Cross-Sector Collaboration

Pre-Existing Conditions

1. The **historical relationships** between the parties – negative or positive prior relations, perceived reputation, previous experience with collaboration.
2. The **degree of difference among partners** – size, influence, resources, legitimacy.

Formative Stage Values Dialogue

3. **Initial and ongoing partner selection** – who is at the table, who else should be there, what degree of risk is involved in approaching various partners, what is the capacity of partners to contribute, what level of commitment do they/can they have to the issue.
4. Identification of **common values and a shared vision** – clarifying values, developing a common language, intentional focus on issue selection, building on “common ground,” building trust-based relationships.
5. **Championing collaborative practice** – building support, ensuring senior level commitment, engaging both formal and informal leaders.
6. **Co-creating/planning strategically** – sharing responsibility and accountability, building on strengths, having mutual respect, anticipating challenges, focusing on a shared vision of a better future state.

Structures to Support Collaborative Work

7. **Developing infrastructure** – staff selection and training, mentoring, reporting, assigning resources, supporting leaders.
8. **Integrative leadership** – establishing legitimacy, motivating others, stimulating thinking, linking process to outcomes.
9. **Shared decision making/mutual accountability** – defined roles, clear governance, dialogue, inclusiveness.
10. **Addressing power differences** – knowledge sharing, resource sharing, developing capacity, using a third party broker.

Processes that Foster Collaboration

11. **Relationship building** – developing trust, sharing information and communicating effectively, dealing with conflict, personal connections, cross-cultural bridge building.
12. **Continual learning** – individual skill and knowledge training, group learning to build common understanding, cultural competency.
13. **Adaptation** – role recalibrations, living with ambiguity, timeline changes, new ways of working.

Commitment to Shared Activities

14. **Carrying out agreed-on tasks** – defined roles and responsibilities, time and resource investment, execution.
15. **Ongoing monitoring and reflection** – collecting and sharing data, reflecting on structures, processes, changes, continually innovating, basing decisions on evidence.

Pre-Existing Conditions

1. Historical Relationships

Some collaborations have a greater likelihood of success depending on previous experiences and perceptions of each other. A prior positive or negative relationship between potential partners, as well as their perceived reputations, can influence views of trustworthiness and legitimacy, and a complete lack of a prior relationship may slow down the development process (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006). A thoughtful, strategic assessment of each other's tangible and intangible resources, as well as their transformative abilities (the capacity to promote change which includes organizational characteristics, motivations and history of cross-sector interactions) can contribute to the formation of partnerships most likely to create social change (Seitanidi, Koufopoulos & Palmer, 2010).

2. Degree of Difference among Partners

Differences among organizations such as status, reputation, and level of social capital can shape interactions and positively or negatively affect collaboration. Also, differences in language, knowledge, and backgrounds can lead to a lack of common understanding of issues (Bedwell et al., 2012). Similarly, competing institutional logics (high level historical patterns that establish “the rules of the game” and influence behaviour) from dissimilar organizations can interfere with agreement on essential elements of process, structure, governance and desired outcomes (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006). Structural characteristics such as leadership and communications structures and division of work and roles can affect the ability to collaborate (Bedwell et al., 2012). Conversely, linked interests are considered essential to value creation in cross-sector collaboration (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012b), therefore taking the time to explore and establish common ground is important.

Formative Stage Values Dialogue

3. Initial and Ongoing Partner Selection

A dynamic approach to partner selection can contribute to effective collaboration. Initial partner selection is influenced by a range of environmental and organizational factors and is critically important to the future success of a partnership (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012b; Seitanidi, Koufopoulos & Palmer, 2010). Partner selection can be ongoing (Clarke & Fuller, 2011) as the collaboration expands or evolves to include other stakeholders. It is important for each organization to determine effective criteria for selecting partners, design appropriate risk assessment techniques, and experiment with and adapt agreements that are used to define the nature of the relationship (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009). Early successes, which help to solidify the partnership, can hinge on the partners’ ability to judge “relational risks,” or the ability of partners to predict potential outcomes based on past experience (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010).

4. Identification of Common Values and Shared Vision

The ability of partners to identify common values and a shared vision, and then set concrete goals and objectives for the collaboration is a contributor to success. Achieving alignment between the organizations’ missions, strategies, and values (Murphy & Arenas, 2010) and developing a common culture held together by shared values and common interests (Selsky & Parker, 2005) is seen as essential to a strong partnership. Jones, Crook and Webb (2007) emphasize the importance of a shared recognition of the need for and definitions of collaboration, a shared value base or philosophy, and common goals or tasks. Finally, Bedwell et al. (2012) include “sense making” (the processing of information when groups share, discuss and interpret information) as a key collaborative behaviour.

5. Championing Collaborative Practice

Cross-sector collaboration has a greater chance of success when influential individuals in partner organizations can garner support for the initiative within and outside their organizations. “Cross-sector collaborations are more likely to succeed when they have committed sponsors and effective champions at many levels who provide formal and informal leadership” (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006, p. 47). Leaders should be strong and competent (Jones, Crook & Webb, 2007), have formal and informal authority, vision, a long-term commitment, integrity, and relational and political skills (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006; Seitanidi & Crane, 2009). These champions also are able to maintain legitimacy with external stakeholders (Selsky & Parker, 2005).

6. Co-creating/Planning Strategically

In a survey of 114 business and non-governmental organizations, the vast majority (85% and 89%, respectively) considered effective planning at the beginning of the relationship as the most important enabler for a successful partnership (C&E, 2010, cited in Seitanidi, Koufopoulos & Palmer, 2010). Le Ber and Branzei (2010) also point to literature that emphasizes the importance of co-design in effective solutions to social problems. Both deliberate, formal planning and “emergent” planning that grows from dialogue and partner involvement is needed, and planning is more likely to be successful if it builds on collaborator competencies and sector strengths (Bryson, Crosby and Stone 2006). Similarly, collaborations are more likely to create public value when they build on individual and organizational self-interest and each sector’s strengths (Seitanidi, Koufopoulos & Palmer, 2010).

Structures to Support Collaborative Work

7. Developing Infrastructure

The organizational infrastructure created to support a collaboration contributes to its effectiveness, but it needs to be fit for purpose: “...careful consideration should be placed on how to structure collaboration, which members will be involved in the collaboration effort, and identifying the factors that can support their interaction” (Bedwell et al., 2012, p. 139). The degree of formality and authority should match the nature of the task and needs of the partners (Selsky & Parker, 2005; Clarke & Fuller, 2011). Structures need to be dynamic and flexible in order to adjust to outside pressures and changing needs (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006; Jones, Crook & Webb, 2007). Appropriate staff selection and training is critical, especially for complex tasks (Bedwell et al., 2012). Interdependence and collective action can result in new hybrid organizations (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a).

8. Integrative Leadership

Many authors note that a particular type of leadership is required for effective cross-sector collaboration. For example, “transformational” leaders have the ability to cope with risks and uncertainty; promote divergent thinking; and create integrated structures and processes. They are able to manage crises in ways that can inspire others to look at the core purposes of the collaboration, promote a strong sense of collective identity, and thus improve interpersonal relationships (Sun and Anderson, 2012). Collaborative leadership includes many relationship-oriented behaviors such as conflict management and encouraging/motivating those involved as well as task-related behaviors such as performing team tasks, solving problems, and providing resources (Yukl, 2006, Marks et al., 2001, and Morgeson et al., 2010, cited in Bedwell et al., 2012).

9. Shared Decision Making/Mutual Accountability

Shared decision-making throughout a collaboration instills a sense of inclusion for members that contributes to mutual accountability. Jones, Crook and Web (2007) identify several authors who support the idea that partners should strive to achieve consensus related to the “population, problem and problem identification processes” early in the collaboration (p. 55). Effective partnerships need to develop accountable decision-making mechanisms that address the concerns of all stakeholders (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009) – loss of control over decisions is a particular concern of non-profits (Selsky & Parker, 2005). Development of effective and efficient collaboration also encompasses “shared responsibilities, rewards, resources, authority or decision making” (Jones, Crook & Webb, 2007, p. 58).

10. Addressing Power Differences

Large power imbalances in terms of size, resources, reputation and expertise between partner organizations can be problematic because they can lead to opportunistic behaviour (Selsky & Parker, 2005) and unfair advantage (Murphy & Arenas, 2010) on the part of more powerful partners. Partners must be willing to use resources and tactics to equalize power and manage conflict (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006) to achieve effective collaboration. The involvement of respected and independent third-party organizations to mediate and facilitate between the organizations that have power asymmetry or previous conflict can have a positive effect (Murphy & Arenas, 2010; Selsky & Parker, 2005).

Processes that Foster Collaboration

11. Relationship Building

Trust-based relationships facilitate the work of collaboration and are described as the glue that “holds the collaboration together” (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006, p. 48). Interpersonal and professional ties provide both tangible and intangible benefits to collaborators (Tsisis, Cooke-Lauder, & Evans, 2015). Murphy and Arenas (2010) emphasize the importance of cross-cultural bridge building, involving respected individuals who are culturally literate and validating outcomes using the knowledge systems of all partners in cross-cultural partnerships. Collaborative relationships can be strengthened through opportunities for positive group interactions, applying constructive group norms and procedures, ensuring inclusiveness and valuing diversity (Jones, Crook & Webb, 2007) as well as creating transparency and managing conflict (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a).

12. Continual Learning

Numerous authors support the need to develop the skills, knowledge and attributes specific to collaboration, as referenced by Jones, Crook and Webb (2007) and Sun and Anderson (2012). Foster-Fishman et al. (2001) identify three important knowledge and skills areas:

- 1) the ability to work well with others, which includes respect, communication, understanding member diversity, and conflict resolution;
- 2) the capacity to create and build effective programs; and
- 3) positive attitudes about their role in the collaboration, the legitimacy of the effort, and the other stakeholders.

Other valuable skills include being able to: reach agreement on the “problem” to be solved; identify committed sponsors and effective champions; continuously build trust; use resources to equalize power and manage conflict; and plan flexibly and inclusively (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006). Group learning opportunities help to develop common understandings and knowledge among participants (Bedwell et al., 2012).

13. Adaptation

The ability of both the partners and the collaboration as a whole to continually adapt and change is seen as crucial to success (Clarke & Fuller, 2011). Le Ber and Branzei (2010) conclude that partners need to engage in ongoing, iterative processes to redefine their role as the partnership unfolds. They also emphasize the ability to adapt and be flexible, and to redefine roles as the partnership evolves. “Role re-calibration” is one form of adaptation. According to Seitanidi (2008), “the odds of success and survival of cross-sector partnerships improve when partners accept adaptive responsibilities and co-design mechanisms for delivering effective solutions to

social problems” (cited in Le Ber & Branzei, 2010, p. 142). Grundinschi et al. (2013) determined through case study research that in order to survive and thrive, collaborators need to be able to find innovative solutions to collaboration challenges, and focus on partner strengths.

Commitment to Shared Activities

14. Carrying Out Agreed-On Tasks

The ability of partners to work together to carry-out tasks and advance toward goals is another aspect of effective collaboration. Bedwell et al. (2012) identify task execution – behaviours and activities directly focused on completing the tasks necessary to achieve collaborative goals – as an essential collaborative behaviour. These include, for example, performing team tasks, solving problems and providing resources. There also is a need for clearly defined responsibility for daily operation of the collaboration (Murphy & Arenas, 2010) and for implementation at the collaborative as well as the partner level (Clarke & Fuller, 2010).

15. Ongoing Monitoring and Reflection

Cross-sector collaborations are more likely to succeed “when they have an accountability system that tracks inputs, processes and outcomes, [and use] a variety of methods for gathering, interpreting and using data” (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006, p. 520). Clarke and Fuller (2010) emphasize the importance of “continual feedback through the strategic formulation and implementation process” (p. 98). Ongoing monitoring and reflection enables partners to make changes and course corrections as needed (Jones, Crook & Webb, 2007) and to regroup and reframe after set-backs (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006). Evaluation helps maintain commitment among partners and increases stakeholders’ willingness to stay involved (Mitchell, O’Leary, & Gerard, 2015; Jones, Crook & Webb, 2007; Clarke & Fuller, 2011).

Conclusion

Many factors influence the effectiveness of cross-sector collaborations. While there is no one “recipe for success,” there is evidence in support of some early strategic decisions, and for fostering continual learning and adaptation. Time invested in co-creating a common vision and building support among member organizations will pay off in the long term. How you work together is as important as what you set out to accomplish, and the collaborative structures and processes you develop can contribute to or detract from effective working relationships. Above all, cross-sector collaboration is a dynamic process that creates value for individuals, organizations and society.

Sources

- Austin, J. E., & Seitanidi, M. M. (2012a). Collaborative value creation: A review of partnering between nonprofits and businesses: Part I. Value creation spectrum and collaboration stages. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 41(5), 726-758.
- Austin, J. E., & Seitanidi, M. M. (2012b). Collaborative value creation: A review of partnering between nonprofits and businesses: Part 2. Partnership processes and outcomes. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 41(6), 929-968.
- Bedwell, W. L., Wildman, J. L., DiazGranados, D., Salazar, M., Kramer, W. S., & Salas, E. (2012). Collaboration at work: An integrative multilevel conceptualization. *Human Resource Management Review*, 22, 128-145.
- Bryson, J. M., Crosby, B. C., & Stone, M. M. (2006). The design and implementation of cross-sector collaboration: Propositions from the literature. *Public Administration Review*, 66, December 2006, 44-55.
- Clarke, A., & Fuller, M. (2010). Collaborative strategic management: Strategy formulation and implementation by multi-organizational cross-sector social partnerships. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 94(1), 85-101.
- Foster-Fishman, P. G., Berkowitz, S. L., Lounsbury, D. W., Jacobson, S., & Allen, N. A. (2001). Building collaborative capacity in community coalitions: A review and integrative framework. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 29(2), 241-261.
- Grundinschi, D., Kaljunen, L., Hokkanen, T., Hallikas, J., Sintonen, S., & Puustinen, A. (2014). Management challenges in cross-sector collaboration: Elderly care case study. *The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, 18(2), article 7.
- Jones, J. M., Crook, W. P., & Webb, J. R. (2007). Collaboration for the provision of services: A review of the literature. *Journal of Community Practice*, 15(4), 41-71.
- Le Ber, M. J., & Branzei, O. (2010). (Re)forming strategic cross-sector partnerships relational processes of social innovation. *Business & Society*, 49(1), 140-172.
- Mitchell, G. E., O'Leary, R., & Gerard, C. (2015). Collaboration and performance: Perspectives from public managers and NGO leaders. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 38(4), 684-716.

Murphy, M., & Arenas, D. (2010). Through Indigenous lenses: Cross-sector collaborations with fringe stakeholders. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 94(Supplement 1), 103-121.

Seitanidi, M. M., & Crane, A. (2009). Implementing CSR through partnerships: Understanding the selection, design and institutionalisation of nonprofit-business partnerships. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 85, 413-429.

Seitanidi, M. M., Koufopoulos, D. N., & Palmer, P. (2010). Partnership formation for change: Indicators for transformative potential in cross sector social partnerships. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 94, 139-161.

Selsky, J. W., & Parker, B. (2005). Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues: Challenges to theory and practice. *Journal of Management*, 31(6), 849-873.

Sun, P. Y. T., & Anderson, M. H. (2012). Civic capacity: Building on transformational leadership to explain successful integrative public leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 23, 309-323.

Tsasis, P., Cooke-Lauder, J., & Evans, J. M. (2015). Working together in a complex environment: Collaborative behaviors and social capital. *International Journal of Public Administration*, (ahead-of-print), 1-9.