TOOL
Collaboration: The Case, The Context and The Impact

What it is

Collaboration is no longer a 'nice-to-have' option. Today, it is a strategic imperative to advance the organization's purpose and long-term sustainability. This resource will help nonprofit boards and staff leadership to have a shared understanding of collaboration. This clarity will enable them to align collaboration with the organization's strategic goals and determine when to join, continue or exit a collaboration.

This resource:

- Defines what is meant by collaboration.
- Makes the case for collaboration and describes its benefits and challenges.
- Outlines different kinds of collaboration, lifecycle stages and the roles that can be played.

Collaboration is defined as two or more organizations, groups or networks who partner to achieve mutually agreed-upon outcomes that can't be achieved by working alone. In authentic collaborations, partners agree to share information, activities, resources, power and decision-making to achieve the common goals.

What is Collaboration?

Collaboration can be called by different names, strategic alliance, partnership, coalition, network, joint venture, consortium, integration and collective impact initiative. They can range from very formal and structured relationships, with greater commitment and potentially higher risk to the organization, to more informal relationships.

Collaboration is different from amalgamations, mergers or shared platforms, which focus on creating or participating in a single legal entity.

Reflective Questions

? Does the board and staff leadership share the same **understanding** about what collaboration means? If not, how might these present barriers to evaluating or effectively participating in a collaboration?

Collaboration Benefits and Challenges

Why Collaborate

There are four important forces at play today that converge to make the case for collaboration.

Increased Demand for Limited Resources

There's an increased demand for programs and services, often coupled with decreased available human and financial resources. As a result, organizations are competing for a finite amount of available funding, often while responding to greater demands. This creates pressure to find alternative ways to improve performance and advance the mission.

Complexity of the Challenges

The complex, interconnected nature of issues such as homelessness, mental health, poverty and climate change require connected and joined up solutions that often span a variety of sectors to achieve impact.

External Pressure from Funders, Governments and Community

There is increasing desire and expectation from funders, policy makers and community members to achieve deeper impact on a range of complex issues as well as a growing focus on upstream prevention, not just immediate issues.

Changing Ways of Working

Increasingly organizations are expected to work across networks, harness diversity, embrace equity and build agile processes. As well, technologies can enable better collaboration, including online platforms, co-creation tools and more sophisticated communications and engagement approaches.

The Benefits of Collaboration

There are many benefits to collaboration. It can help the organization to:

- ☑ Find operational efficiencies and effectiveness by sharing or integrating administrative or support functions.
- ☑ Improve the quality and effectiveness of programs and services through coordination, sharing, joint programming and integration.
- ☑ Address large-scale and complex issues in the broader community by taking collective action, which advances the mission in ways that can't be achieved by working alone.

- ☑ Gain knowledge by accessing diverse perspectives, alternative approaches and experiment with new ideas.
- ☑ Provide leadership opportunities for staff to connect outside of the organization.

Reflective Questions

What **strategic benefits** could the organization derive from collaboration? How could collaboration help to meaningfully advance the organization's mission?

The Challenges of Collaboration

Collaboration is not without its challenges, particularly with more formal and complicated collaborations. Here are some common ones:

Getting the board and/or staff leadership to commit to collaboration as a viable strategy to achieve mission and enhance organizational capacity.

Many collaborations are inherently complex because they involve a group of diverse partners coming together to achieve a shared vision, often on tough and entrenched issues. **But they can also offer an important pathway to advance the mission with limited resources and capacities.** If an organization nurtures an internal culture of collaboration, they'll be better positioned to address the complexity and **mitigate** the risks.

*[Learn more: **Foster Your Organization's Culture of Collaboration**; **Lead the Organization to Successful Collaborations**; **Create a Board Policy on Collaboration**]*

Finding the resources to do it well. Some collaborations, such as complicated program interventions or larger scale initiatives, require significant resources to achieve their goals.

Tensions can also rise when there's an adverse effect on an organization's current funding model. Examples can include collaborations that involve program funds transferring from one organization to another.

Funders are increasingly interested in supporting collaboration but it's critical to make a strong case for how this will lead to greater meaningful impacts. As well, each of the collaboration partners must buy into the benefits to be achieved.

Feeling confident that the organization's collaborations are a good use of the organization's resources and time.

This can be addressed by ensuring it's in the right collaborations, for the right reasons with the right partners

*[Learn more: **Collaboration Success Factors Checklist; Assess your Collaborations: Explore, Commit, Continue or Exit**]*

Managing partner expectations and the organization's deliverables.

Some roles in a collaboration require more commitment than others. For example, an organization that hosts the backbone to the collaboration requires a lot more than if they are a contributor.

It's important that the staff leadership fully understands what the collaboration expects of the organization, such as operational, technology and funding support, shared space, program or system integration and/or staff time and capacity. It's also important that the staff or Steering Committee of the collaboration feel fully supported by the organization's leaders.

*[Learn more: **Create or Assess a Memorandum of Understanding; Build Organizational Capacity for Effective Collaboration; Mitigate the Risks of Collaboration**]*

Managing risk and multiple accountabilities, while not being fully in control of deliverables or results.

These risks can be mitigated by establishing a reasonable level of risk tolerance, doing a thorough assessment of the collaboration before committing, weighing benefits against costs, and ensuring there's a good MOU.

*[Learn more: **Mitigate the Risks of Collaboration; Assess your Collaborations: Explore, Commit, Continue or Exit; Create or Assess a Memorandum of Understanding; Foster Your Organization's Culture of Collaboration**]*

Reflective Questions

Do the organization's leaders appreciate the **unique nature of collaborations**, particularly the more complicated ones? Do they appreciate that collaboration requires a comfort with complexity and patience for the long-term effort to achieve meaningful impacts? Are they willing and able to commit the required time and resources? What has the organization done to mitigate the challenges associated with collaboration?

Different Types of Collaboration

There are many different types of collaboration. The three archetypes explored below focus on the outcomes of each collaboration type and are commonly used terms within the nonprofit sector.

Simple

These types of collaboration don't require significant commitments or present significant risks to the organization. They tend to be task-oriented and have clear expectations, solutions and strategies.

Examples include:

- An advocacy network
- Joint program referrals.
- Research or knowledge generation and exchange.

Complicated

These collaborations require some commitment and present a manageable amount of risk. There is often agreement on the problem and while the solutions aren't straightforward, they can be broken down into specific tasks that usually require certain kinds of expertise for success.

There's some alignment between partners in purpose and values and reliable funding. Examples include:

- Two or more organizations integrating or collaboratively launching programs or services (e.g. single door for individuals accessing services; combining programs to reach new markets).
- Strengthening operational efficiencies and effectiveness by sharing or integrating administrative and support functions (e.g. accounting, human resources, IT, fundraising) or sharing space.
- Identifying strategies through community planning tables.

Complex

These collaborations require a deeper, more extensive commitment and can present significant risks to the organization. There is less agreement on the problem or issues, solutions aren't clear and there are many variables. A diverse set of perspectives and knowledge is important when tackling these multifaceted problems. Examples include:

- Program, service, back-office or other integrations and shared space (hub) where there is less obvious alignment between the purposes and values of participating organizations and/or less reliable funding.
- Nonprofit organizations work with other community partners, sometimes from different sectors, to address a complex community issue, such as food security or youth mental health.

Collective Impact is a framework used for multi-sector collaborations that are longer-term efforts that often include government, nonprofits, businesses and community members. The framework consists of five core conditions – the development of a common agenda, shared measurement strategies, aligning activities in mutually reinforcing ways, continuous communications and the creation of backbone infrastructure to support the collective work.

Reflective Questions

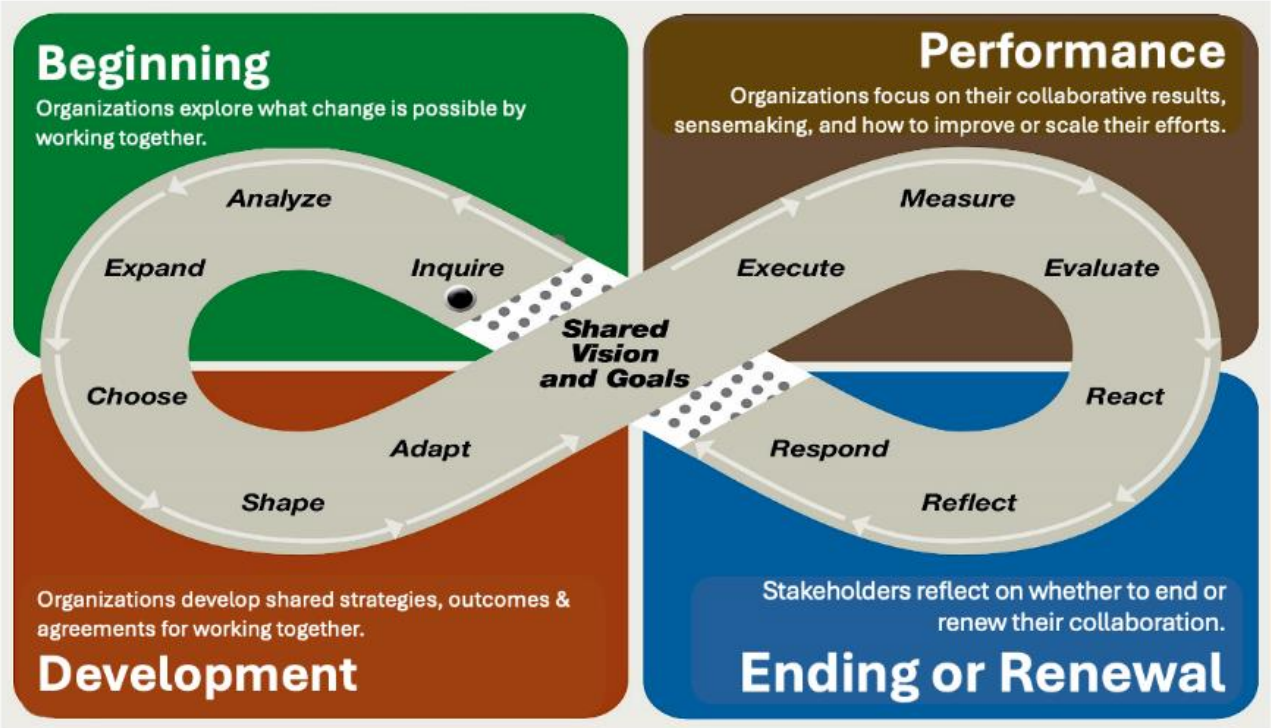
? Does staff leadership think the organization is involved in the **right mix** of collaborations to achieve its strategic goals (e.g. greater organizational efficiencies, better programs and/or amplified impacts)?

Stages of the Collaboration Life Cycle

The collaboration lifecycle can be a useful framework for setting expectations and thinking about how they evolve and what kinds of leadership, resources and capacities may be required over time. Some collaborations move through these cycles quickly while others may take years and undergo several cycles of renewal.

It's most important to recognize that as collaborations adapt, the leadership, resources and capacities they require may change.

There are four stages in the collaboration life cycle.



- **The first is the beginning or idea stage.** Two or more organizations get together to discuss the idea of collaborating and agree to a common and mutually beneficial approach and intended outcomes.

  Leaders in this stage are strong networkers and visionaries. They know how to build trust and harness the energies and talents of others and build commitment to new possibilities. Challenges include finding the resources and getting consensus about the vision and goals.

- **The second is the development stage.** Partners begin to develop their strategies and desired outcomes. They also create a shared approach that includes defining how they will share information, resources, power and decision-making.

  Leaders are entrepreneurial and strategic as well as good capacity-builders. Challenges during this phase include maintaining a high level of engagement, beyond the founding partners. Partners may also feel overwhelmed by the expectations.

- **The third is the performance and outcomes stage.** Partners focus on the results being achieved by the collaboration. This is done through evaluation and sense-making as well as conversations about opportunities to create more impact, improve processes, and refine actions and strategies.

Leaders of this phase are good managers. They can get work done and are prepared to look closely at what's been achieved and how. Challenges include resistance to change or new ideas by some partners, potential loss of resources and shifts in circumstances or context.

- **The final stage of the collaboration life cycle is ending or renewal.** This stage happens for different reasons: the end of funding, a change in partners, or the achievement of the collaboration outcomes.

  The renewal phase requires leaders who are disruptors and creators; they can re-vitalize the vision, find new resources and pass the baton to new leaders. In the case of ending, leaders know how to effectively close the collaboration by creating opportunities to reflect and celebrate the accomplishments.

Reflective Questions

? When asked to participate in a collaboration, does the leadership consider **the stage of the collaboration in its lifecycle** and consider its implications for their involvement? Is leadership aware of the stage of each of their existing collaborations and the implications for resource allocation and meeting expectations?

To learn more, read, *ARTICLE | Exploring the Collaboration Cycle* by Liz Weaver

Potential Roles

There are many roles an organization can play in a collaboration and these roles can vary according to the type of collaboration. For example, simple collaborations don't require deep engagement, so the organization's role is focused on participation and some coordination. More complicated or complex collaborations often involve higher stakes and therefore they may require deeper engagement and greater commitment.

Organizational roles can also vary based on the collaboration's stage in its lifecycle, as roles can shift as the collaboration evolves. The beginning stages need more visionaries, convenors and relationship builders. As the collaboration matures, more formal governance roles and action teams are often required.

Common roles in collaborations can include:

- **Convenor:** This role is an individual, group or organization who takes lead responsibility for initiating the collaborative effort. This person, group or

organization is responsible for initiating the collaborative idea and moving it forward and therefore critical in the early stage of the collaboration.

- **Steering or Stewardship Committee:** This role provides strategic guidance and monitors the progress and health of the collaboration and its partners. It plays an important role in supporting partners and ensuring accountabilities and expectations are met as well as mobilizing resources and ensuring clear communications.

- **Work Groups or Action Teams**: This role is more prominent as the collaboration reaches the performance stage. Various Work Groups or Action Teams may focus on specific activities or initiatives, but their ultimate function is to get their work done and achieve the intended results.

- **Backbone Infrastructure:** This role is most often found in collective impact initiatives which are more long-term in nature and involve multiple partners from various sectors and perspectives. The role of the backbone is to mobilize, coordinate and facilitate key elements of the collaboration including guiding vision and strategy, establishing shared measurement systems, building public will, advancing policy, championing equity and mobilizing funding to support the initiative.

Reflective Questions

? Is the organization clear about the **roles they are playing** in their collaborations, and do they align with the organization's strengths? Do the organization's roles match their partner's expectations? If not, what are the implications and how are they effectively addressed?