TOOL
Create a Board Policy on Collaboration

What it is

A board policy (*and/or corporate policy framework*) on collaboration helps your organization to be more successful collaborators. Collaboration can involve a range of options including advocacy efforts, combining resources and integrating programs, or longer-term collective impact initiatives.

This policy signals the organization's deep commitment to collaboration and ensures the right mechanisms are in place to enable the Board to effectively oversee them.

The tool can be used to develop a board policy or to review and revise an existing one. It provides a checklist of the six key components that should be included in the policy, with examples of how it looks in practice, and why each is important.

Checklist: A good board policy on collaboration

There isn't one format for a board policy on collaboration. It should be customized to reflect your organization's unique purpose, risk tolerances, capacities, and other circumstances.

While you may choose to include other components in your policy, this tool describes the essential ones.

Summary: A board policy on collaboration should at least do the following:

- Describe its commitment to and the parameters of collaboration
- Outline how the organization's collaborations will be inventoried
- Identify how risk will be assessed and mitigated
- Outline approvals and delegations
- Describe how the organization's collaborative work will be supported

Describe the organization's commitment to and parameters for collaboration.

For example, it could:

- ☑ Clearly outline the board and staff leadership's **shared understanding** about what the word 'collaboration' means and use it to create parameters for the policy. A definition might be:

  > *Collaboration is defined as two or more organizations, groups or networks working in partnership to achieve mutually agreed-upon outcomes that can't be achieved by working alone. Authentic collaborations are anchored in shared decision-making, information, resources, accountability and activities to achieve this common goal.*
  >
  > *Collaboration is different from a merger, amalgamation or shared platform, which are single legal entities. It's also more than just an engagement strategy.*

- ☑ Describe a **range of collaborations** included in the policy, such as partnerships, coalitions, joint ventures, alliances, integrations and collective impact initiatives. The board policy on collaboration doesn't have to cover every one of the organization's collaborative relationships. (e.g. *it might not apply to very informal relationships with other organizations*).

- ☑ Provide a **synopsis of how collaboration advances the organization's purpose, and the benefits derived** from the relationships with other organizations, groups and networks. Collaborations might range from complex ones that increase the impact of programs, create more back-office efficiencies and/or address community-wide issues to simpler collaborations that advocate for change or increase access to new markets or resources.

  *[Learn more: **Collaboration: The Case, The Context and The Impact**]*

Why it's important

This generates a clear and consistent understanding among the board and staff leadership about what is meant by collaborations thereby reducing the need for the board to micromanage them.

It prompts conversations about who the organization should collaborate with and why. It also reinforces that collaborations must demonstrate clear strategic alignment with the organization's purpose and deliver benefits that are valued by both the board and staff.

Outline how the organization's collaborations will be inventoried.

For example,

☑ The policy describes the staff's process for creating an inventory of the organization's collaborations but is not the inventory itself. It's important to state in the policy that the staff leadership is responsible for keeping the inventory current.

Here are some tips for creating an inventory of collaborations:

- Use a clear definition of collaboration to **determine which are inventoried and how they are organized** (*e.g. by type of collaboration relationship; by significance*). It's worth keeping some record of all the organization's collaborations so there's a fulsome picture of its relationships.
- The inventory can be captured as a **simple list** with consistent categories (*e.g. name of organization; type of collaboration; intended goals; link to collaboration documents)*. Or it can be a more **dynamic map** that shows the interconnectedness of relationships, or alignments with the organization's purpose and program philosophy or delivery.

Why it's important

It gives the board confidence that information about the organization's collaborations is captured in a single place which enables a reliable assessment. It also focuses attention on the quality of collaborations rather than quantity.

It helps fulfill the board's foresight responsibility by enabling strategic conversations about how collaborations advance the mission and how to create a more robust portfolio of collaborations.

Identify the mechanisms to assess and mitigate risks

For example, these mechanisms might include:

- ☑ **Screening** each potential collaboration through a set of criteria before committing.

  *[Learn more: **Assess Your Collaborations: Explore, Commit, Continue or Exit**].*

  This might include requiring that a collaboration must:

  - Align and advance the organization's purpose.
  - Be a good use of the organization's resources (e.g. weighing tangible and intangible benefits with the hard/soft costs to the organization).
  - Fit with the organization's priorities and comfort level with risk (e.g. financial, reputational, purpose alignment).
  - Show real potential for success.

- ☑ Ensuring that more intensive collaborations have **formal evaluation processes** that are designed and agreed to by all the collaboration partners.

  *[Learn more: **Provide Oversight of a Collaboration's Evaluation**]*

- ☑ Alerting the board whenever there are **significant risks** to the organization and providing reasonable and effective strategies to mitigate those risks.

  *[Learn more: **Mitigate the Risks of Collaboration**]*

- ☑ Allocating time, a least once a year for the board and staff leadership to **reflect** on its collaboration successes, lessons learned and their impacts on the organization's mission.

Why it's important

This enables the board to fulfill its responsibility for oversight and gives confidence that the organization's collaborations are the right ones, with the right risk profile.

Describe essential documents required by collaborations

Examples of important documents:

- Partners jointly create, and continuously revise, a **document which clearly and comprehensively describes the collaboration's intent and how it will work**, such as;

    - Shared goals and anticipated benefits.
    - Governance structures, including how decisions are made.
    - Processes, such as conflict resolution and how to exit the collaboration.
    - Mechanisms for evaluation.

- More complex collaborations, with greater risks and resource commitments should have a **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)** – a written agreement signed by all partners which explicitly outlines their relationship and expectations. The MOU might describe:

    - Partner roles and responsibilities.
    - How information will be shared between partners and more broadly.
    - Policies related to areas of potential risk (e.g. signing authority, hiring and privacy).
    - Expected partner resource commitments and the timing for their disbursement.

*[Learn more: **Create or Assess a Memorandum of Understanding**].*

Why it's important

This enables the board to fulfill its oversight responsibilities by ensuring that resources are used wisely, and risks are mitigated. It also gives the Board confidence that the accountability demands of staff/volunteers who support and participate in collaborations can be met.

Outline what requires board input, decision-making approvals, and authorization and what is delegated to the CEO/ED

For example, it might state that:

- *Most collaborative activities **fall solely within the operational responsibilities of the CEO.** For these collaborations, the board can expect to be updated on progress at least annually and have opportunities to discuss the organization's overall strategy for collaboration (e.g. determining level of priority; envisioning how they can advance the purpose)*

- *However, the Board will be **more involved** (e.g. authorization and approvals required) in collaborations that have significant impact or risk to the organization (e.g. major financial, resource and/or reputational implications; high degrees of complexity, difficult relationships and/or controversial issues).*

  *[Learn more: **Mitigate the Risks of Collaboration**]*

  *In these cases, the **board expects to receive timely, accurate and comprehensive information and participate in open dialogues** about these collaborations (e.g. participate in the due diligence process; discuss risk management and strategies to enhance the collaboration's success)*

  The Board may choose to delegate oversight of the collaboration to a subcommittee or task force.

Why it's important

The Board is fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities by clearly articulating when it must be more engaged (*e.g. performing its due diligence*). It also empowers staff to develop and nurture positive collaborations without having to regularly check-in with the Board thereby eliminating Board micromanagement.

Describe how the organization supports collaboration activities, both internally and within a collaboration

For example, it might say:

- ☑ We will intentionally create an **organizational culture** that enables strong collaborations.

  *[Learn more: **Foster Your Organization's Culture of Collaboration**]*

- ☑ We **support staff/board members who are directly participating** in a collaboration by empowering them to make decisions in the best interests of the collective, without being burdened by bureaucratic approval processes, and gives them the appropriate amount of time and resources to participate effectively.

- ☑ We carefully consider **how to support each of our collaborations**, including appropriately sharing our assets (*e.g. financial, staff, technology, credibility*), meeting our commitments to them, and appreciating that collaborations are often dynamic systems that need the space to shift directions, reallocate resources and change priorities to be successful.

  *[Learn more: **Build Organizational Capacity for Effective Collaboration**]*

Why it's important

This helps avoid common collaboration pitfalls, such unfulfilled partner commitments or representatives at the collaboration table feeling unsupported. It also clearly signals that the board values collaborations and understands their unique nature.

Some content of this tool is drawn from Collaboration Coach (2013).