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RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Does cross-sector collaboration
really produce better results?

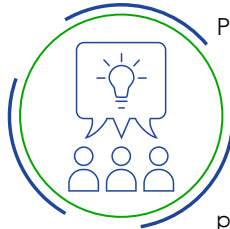
Although the practice of cross-sector collaboration appears to be increasing as a means to address complex social challenges, it's difficult to demonstrate the benefits of a collaborative approach in comparison to a single-sector approach, as there are many complicated variables that influence the success or failure of collaborative initiatives. In his article "Designing Collaborative Governance Decision-Making in Search of a 'Collaborative Advantage'" recently published in *Public Management Review*, Carey Doberstein, Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of British Columbia, hones in on this dilemma by investigating collective decision making around homelessness program policy in Vancouver and asking, "Are the policy outputs from collaborative governance substantively different than that which would have been produced from more traditional bureaucratic policymaking?"

The Metro Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness comprises more than 120 members representing service providers, community-based organizations, business and labor, and all levels of government. Doberstein observed the collaboration in action for several weeks, focusing on a period of intense decision making; interviewed 10 of its members; and reviewed data on how members ranked homelessness program proposals to which they were considering allocating public funds. The “collaborative advantage” he describes is a decision — with real world implications — that is unlikely to have been arrived at by one sector or silo deliberating alone. Through collaborative governance, stakeholders share their differing contextual knowledge and viewpoints on policy problems and solutions to shape a final, more robustly informed, proposed solution. In email correspondence with The Intersector Project, Doberstein shared that participants in such collaborations “realize that while this type of work is tough, it is a great opportunity to better understand their sector and make a bigger difference than they could on their own.”

Through his research, Doberstein was able to identify key design and management features that contributed to the collaboration’s ability to arrive at decisions that would have been difficult for policymakers in a single sector to achieve alone. His findings are relevant to managers of collaborations in which a kaleidoscope of expertise and actors shape decision making around prioritization and investment of public funds.

TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS

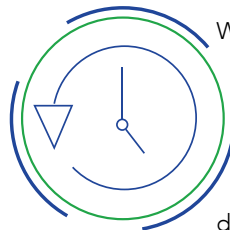
SELECT PARTNERS WHO ARE EXPERT IN THEIR FIELD BUT ALSO OPEN TO HEARING NEW INFORMATION — AND WILLING TO CHANGE THEIR MIND ON THE ISSUES — TO PARTICIPATE IN THE COLLABORATION.



Participants should be able to confidently communicate their knowledge of their field but also able to listen and allow their thinking to be informed by new information, instead of holding an uncompromising ideology or vision. Collaboration managers may ask potential partners to complete a self-assessment that examines whether they are open to others’ perspectives and willing to make decisions that are best for the partnership rather than in their own interest. “Having a clear vision, a positive demeanour, a willingness to listen, accept new knowledge, and perhaps change their mind on issues, is essential,” Doberstein told us. Without these qualities, a collaborative advantage is less likely to be achieved, and partners are more likely to simply bargain for their respective best interests.

- To help potential partners perform a self-assessment, refer them to Tool # 1 Assessing Partnership on pp. 5 – 6 of the Capacity Project Toolkit (who.int/workforcealliance/knowledge/toolkit/35.pdf?ua=1) and the Organizational Readiness Assessment (jsi.com/JSIInternet/Inc/Common/download_publication?id=14333&lid=3) on p. 19 of Engaging Your Community: A Toolkit for Partnership, Collaboration, and Action. Both resources provide helpful questions for individuals or organizations to consider before entering a collaboration.
- To identify experts on the issue your collaborative aims to address, see p. 23 of The Partnering Toolbook (thepartneringinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Partnering-Toolbook-en-20113.pdf) from The Partnering Initiative for a stakeholder mapping exercise.

BALANCE TIME LIMITS ON DELIBERATION WITH FLEXIBILITY IN ALLOWING FOR ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION THAT MAY ARISE.

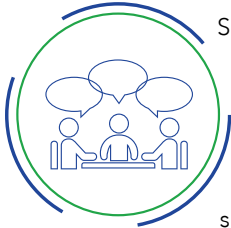


While the perfect balance may take years to achieve and will vary depending on a collaboration’s size and scope, a general guideline is for collaboration managers to allocate and communicate to partners exact time measures for deliberation while also anticipating where further discussion time may be necessary and remaining flexible to that possibility. This keeps discussions focused but allows for enough time to thoroughly address the issues, whereas “without some time pressure and structure, collaborations will tend to go in circles without achieving consensus,” Doberstein shared with us.

- For an example of a meeting agenda that can be used to record time planned — and actually used — for discussion in meetings, see the Meeting Agenda Template (hbr.org/resources/images/article_assets/2015/03/W150313_SCHWARZ_MEETINGAGENDA-1.png) from a Harvard Business Review article on how to set an agenda for an effective meeting.

TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS (CONT.)

DELEGATE COMPLICATED TASKS TO SMALLER GROUPS THAT WILL WORK INDEPENDENTLY AND REPORT DECISIONS BACK TO PROJECT MANAGERS.



Splitting a large group into smaller groups to handle tasks and make decisions will increase the collaborative's efficiency. For example, the collaborative needed to take a close look at program proposals for homeless services, a task that involved detailed analysis and would be difficult for all 120 members to perform together. The managers divided the Committee into smaller groups of five or six individuals, retaining the Committee's diversity of expertise and experience within each of the small groups, ensuring that shelter providers, youth specialists, and mental health professionals were not placed all together in one group. This helps a collaboration move forward more efficiently while ensuring that it is still making "policy and program decisions with the most insight and expertise at the table," which is "the whole point of collaborative governance," Doberstein shared with us. During small group work, the manager and supporting staff were present to answer technical questions about budget and administrative regulations.

- See Developing Multi-Sector Task Forces or Action Committees for the Initiative (ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/structure/organizational-structure/multisector-task-forces/main) from Community Tool Box for further discussion on the benefits of forming small groups, how to define the relationship of the smaller group(s) to the larger collaborative, how to define each group's purpose, and more.
- For an example of a governance structure set up in this manner, see our case study Preparing Students for STEM Jobs in New York City (intersector.com/case/ptech_newyork/). In this collaboration that created and now oversees a six-year high school to prepare students for STEM careers, a Steering Committee made up of individuals from each sector makes decisions based on the work of planning committees, which develop recommendations and provide updates on specific areas of school functioning, such as course scope and sequence, and workplace learning.

TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS (CONT.)

CONSIDER ITEMS THAT ARE LIKELY TO PRODUCE CONSENSUS AT THE TOP OF AN AGENDA AND THOSE LIKELY TO PRODUCE DISSENSION AT THE BOTTOM.



“Front-load [the agenda with] small, easy wins” Doberstein writes, to begin discussions with areas of agreement. This encourages cooperation early in a meeting, which may help partners better handle conflict later on. If the contentious issues do cause problems later on, front-loading small easy wins is also like getting “a few barrels of water out of the well if there is a chance that it is going to be poisoned later.”

- Help build an atmosphere of trust and openness, which can help partners in navigating potential conflict further down the road, through guidelines and exercises included in Effective Internal Communications on pp. 79 – 87 of the The Partnership Toolkit (sparc.bc.ca/the-partnership-toolkit) from Collaboration Roundtable; Section 3: Communicating Within the Partnership on pp. 22 – 25 in Talking the Walk (thepartneringinitiative.org/publications/toolbook-series/talking-the-walk/) from The Partnering Initiative; and Section 3 on trust in Collaboration Toolkit: How to Build, Fix, and Sustain Productive Partnerships (cops.usdoj.gov/html/cd_rom/collaboration_toolkit/pubs/collaborationtoolkit.pdf) from the U.S. Department of Justice.

ABOUT RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Academic research often holds knowledge that can benefit the many practitioners working in cross-sector collaborations. For our Research to Practice series (intersector.com/tag/research-to-practice/), we examine these articles and interview their authors to highlight key facts, actionable takeaways, and additional resources practitioners can turn to for guidance in their cross-sector work.

For more information on our Research to Practice series, please contact us at research@intersector.com.