Making Collaborations Work for Children, Youth, and Families

Daniel F. Perkins, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Family and Youth Resiliency
323 Agricultural Administration Building
University Park, PA 16802-2601
(814) 865-6988
Fax (814) 863-4753
Email: dfp102@psu.edu

Lynne Borden, Ph.D.
Extension Specialist, Associate Professor
University of Arizona
School of Family Studies & Consumer Sciences
Division of Family Studies & Human Development
P. O. Box 210033
Tucson, AZ 85721-0033
(520) 621-1063
Fax (520) 621-9445
Email: bordenl@ag.arizona.edu

Abstract

Meeting the complex needs of today’s communities, in a time where there are fewer resources to address the growing demands on services, requires the multiple sectors of the community to come together to address issues such as family violence, poverty, poor educational systems and others. Collaborations offer one solution to these complex issues. A collaboration is a social group that brings together disparate parties with diverse perspectives and experiences. These collaborative groups comprised of, community groups and human service professionals are working together to develop innovative solutions to the issues facing our children, youth and families. Too frequently, however, collaborative groups run into a roadblock and cannot figure another route to take so they fold. Or sometimes-collaborative groups cannot seem to get past the “meeting to meet” phase. The purpose of this paper is to connect the theory and the practice of collaborative relationships to identify common roadblocks or reasons a collaboration is unable to move forward. We examine the levels of linkages within the community and the factors needed to build and maintain an effective, successful collaboration. Five levels of community linkage are presented, these include: networking, cooperation, coordination, coalition, and collaboration. The purpose, structure, and process of each level are described in detail. Factors associated with collaborations are also presented and described in this paper. These factors can either promote or inhibit the effectiveness of a collaboration, thus affecting its desired outcomes. Practical strategies for groups to assess their level of linkage and factors will be described during the conference presentation.
Meeting the complex needs of today’s communities, in a time where there are fewer resources to address the growing demands on services, requires the multiple sectors of the community to come together to address these issues. Currently, community organizations, schools, governmental agencies, and families are facing the daunting task of addressing complex issues such as family violence, poverty, poor educational systems and others. Given the complexity of these issues, it is clear that many social problems are influenced at multiple levels requiring a comprehensive examination of the issue through a community-wide effort, such as collaboration (Connell & Kubisch, 1998; Perkins, Borden & Knox, 1999; Silverman & Williamson, 1997; Wandersman & Nation, 1998). A collaboration is a social group that brings together disparate parties with diverse perspectives and experiences (Gray, 1989). Indeed, a collaboration is “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem [or issue] can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (Gray, 1989; p. 5).

Thus, the effective prevention, intervention, and treatment of social issues involve multiple systems, ranging from the individual and the family, to social service agencies, law enforcement, employers, courts, schools, and health care providers. Often, however, these systems work independently of each other, and consequently are ineffective in fully addressing the social issues (Dryfoos, 1990, 1998). Yet, many individuals and groups recommend working together to form strong collaborative relationships to improve the present status and future well-being of children, youth, families, and the communities in which they live (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992, 1995; Perkins, Borden, & Hogue, 1998). Moreover, many local, state, and federal initiatives focused on children, youth, and families now require collaboration among multiple sectors (Borden, 1999). While collaboration is easily said, experience shows that it is not easily done. In fact, collaboration has also been described it as being as difficult as teaching dinosaurs to dance with power rangers (Perkins, Ferrari, Covey, & Keith, 1994).

Too frequently, collaborative groups run into a roadblock and cannot figure another route to take so they fold. Or sometimes-collaborative groups cannot seem to get past the “meeting-to-meet” phase. Thus, identifying and understanding the roadblocks or the reasons your collaboration is unable to move forward increases the likelihood of a community group dealing with the problem and ultimately achieving shared goals and outcomes.

The purpose of this manuscript is to connect the theory and the practice of collaborative relationships. We examine the levels of linkages within the community and the factors needed to build and maintain an effective, successful collaboration. This manuscript builds on the belief that effective collaboration is only the process to help people and organizations bolster communities to strengthen children, youth, and families. Once it is clear “what” conditions are needed, collaboration can address “how” innovative actions can be mobilized.
Method

This manuscript utilizes the United States’ National Network on Collaboration (NNCO) publication entitled Collaboration Framework as a base from which to think about how to collaborate (Hogue et al., 1995). Formed in 1995 and completed in 2000, NNCO was a collaborative effort among Extension Specialists from 19 U.S. Land Grant Universities and the Cooperative States Research Education and Extension Service. NNCO utilized knowledge and expertise of specialists to provide educational materials and technical assistance regarding community collaborations. Based on a thorough review of the research and applied literature (e.g., Ash, 1989; Caplan, 1989; DelPizzo, 1990; Gomez, 1990; Kull, 1991), NNCO members developed the Collaboration Framework. The Collaboration Framework contains information about levels of linkages within the community and the factors, both process and contextual, that can either promote or inhibit the effectiveness of a collaboration that, in turn, affects its desired outcomes. The factors were drawn from the literature review that identified common factors and characteristics that influence collaboration’s success. For example in an empirical study, Perkins and his colleagues (Perkins, Borden, & Knox, 1999) identified five major characteristics: leadership, unity, communication, participation by citizens and informal organizations, and successful accomplishments. Borden (1999) also identified four factors: internal communication, external communication, membership, and goal setting.

This manuscript will detail the level of linkages and the factors found to be related to successful collaborations. In addition, two self-evaluation tools will be presented that offer strategies for practitioners to critically examine their collaborative effort in terms of level of linkage and factors, thereby increasing its likelihood of success.

Levels of Linkage

There are five levels of community linkage include networking, cooperation, coordination, coalition, and collaboration. Within each level is the identification of the level’s purpose, structure and process. The levels of linkage are described in Table 1.

Networking, the first level of linkage is defined as the sharing of information among organizations. For example, a networking group would meet to share relevant information on a specific topic (e.g., disaster relief, employment opportunities, and child care referrals). Networking’s purpose is to provide an opportunity for dialogue and common understanding, to be clearinghouse for information, and to create a base of support for a specific issue. The structure needed for a Network to function effectively is flexibility, not hierarchical, and has loosely defined roles with the focus of providing a link among organizations. The process involved within a Network includes: low level leadership, minimal decision-making, low conflict, and informal communication procedure.
### Table 1. Community Linkages – Choices and Decisions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>- Dialog and common understanding</td>
<td>- Non-hierarchical</td>
<td>- Low key leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Clearinghouse for information</td>
<td>- Loose/flexible link</td>
<td>- Minimal decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Create base of support</td>
<td>- Roles loosely defined</td>
<td>- Little conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Community action is primary link among members</td>
<td>- Informal communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>- Match needs and provide coordination</td>
<td>- Central body of people as communication hub</td>
<td>- Facilitative leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or Alliance</td>
<td>- Limit duplication of services</td>
<td>- Semi-formal links</td>
<td>- Complex decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Ensure tasks are done</td>
<td>- Roles somewhat defined</td>
<td>- Some conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Links are advisory</td>
<td>- Formal communications within the central group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or Partnership</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Group leverages/raises money</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Share resources to address common issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Merge resource base to create something new</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition</td>
<td>- Share ideas and be willing to pull resources from existing systems</td>
<td>- Central body of people consists of decision makers</td>
<td>- Autonomous leadership but focus in on issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Develop commitment for a minimum of three years</td>
<td>- Roles defined</td>
<td>- Group decision making in central and subgroups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Links formalized</td>
<td>- Communication is frequent and clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Group develops new resources and joint budget</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>- Accomplish shared vision and impact benchmarks</td>
<td>- All members involved in decision making</td>
<td>- Shared leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Build interdependent system to address issues and opportunities</td>
<td>- Roles and time defined</td>
<td>- Decision making formal with all members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Links formal with written agreement</td>
<td>- Communication is common and prioritized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Group develops new resources and joint budget</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Note: Modified chart from Houge (1994) Community Based Collaborations-Wellness Multiplied.</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The second level of linkage, **Cooperation**, is defined as the matching and organizing of existing programs and services to meet identified needs. An example of Cooperation is a volunteer association comprised of multiple organizations that meet to coordinate their services to better coordinate the volunteer efforts within the community. Cooperation’s *purpose* is to match needs, limit duplication of services and ensure that tasks are completed. The *structure* required for Cooperation includes a central communication hub, semi-formal links between organizations, roles within the group somewhat defined, and money is leveraged and raised. The *process* needed for Cooperation requires facilitative leaders; complex decision-making, formal communication among the central body of participating organizations, and within this level of linkage there will be some, albeit minimal, conflict.

The third level of linkage, **Coordination**, is defined as the integration of resources that allows for the development or creation of new projects/programs and addresses a common issue. For example, partnering youth organizations in a particular community create a joint budget to support the annual communication booth at the local community festival where a common brochure is distributed listing the activities available within each organization. Coordination’s *purpose* is to share resources to address common issues and merge the resources available from individual organizations to address common issues. The *structure* of Coordination requires: a central body of organizations willing to make decisions, roles and expectations within the group that are clearly defined, links within the group that are also clearly defined, the collective development of new resources, and has a joint budget. The *process* of Coordination involves leadership that is autonomous and focused on one issue, decision-making occurs both within the central group and subgroups, and communication is frequent and clear. Moreover, conflict within this level increases as part of the process.

The fourth level of linkage, **Coalition**, is defined as multiple organizations coming together and pooling their resources from existing systems to work together on a prescribed issue for a minimum of three years. For example, a group forms a Coalition to increase the availability of after-school programs for youth by pooling their resources to sponsor AmeriCorp members that will provide much needed support to local youth programs. Coalition’s *purpose* is to share ideas and be willing to pull resources from existing systems to create a way to address a common issue. The *structure* of a Coalition demands that all the members be involved in the decision making process, there are clear expectations involved in the roles and the time commitment required as part of this group, written agreements to establish formal links, and the procurement of new resources that involve a joint budget. The Coalition *process* requires shared leadership, formal decision making among all organizations, formal and prioritized communication, and high level of commitment both in terms of time and resources. All of these components increase the potential for conflict. The major difference distinguishing between the level of coordination and coalition is the commitment of time and resources is much greater for the coalition level of linkage.

The fifth and final level, **Collaboration**, is defined when multiple organizations come together and act as a new entity that has a shared vision and the power to impact the participating organizations. An example of a collaborative is a Collaboration formed to
address family violence that included such groups as social services, law enforcement, hospitals, schools, judicial system and others. The Collaboration determines that in order to better serve and assist victims of family violence the reporting for local law enforcement system needs to change, new reporting procedures established and sent to local law enforcement to be implemented. The Collaboration’s purpose is to accomplish shared and impact benchmarks, to build an interdependent system to address issues and opportunities.

The structure of the Collaborative effort involves shared decision-making through consensus; formalized roles, time commitment, and evaluation; and, written agreements that formalize the relationships among organizations and their work assignments. The Collaborations process requires high levels of leadership, trust, and productivity; equally shared ideas and decisions; structured formal and informal communication needs to occur frequently for both collaboration members and for the members of partnering organizations who are not directly involved in the collaboration but will be impact by the collaboration’s decisions. The Collaborative process offers organizations the opportunity to be engaged in comprehensive efforts that often have long-term implications for the work of the organization often requiring a redefining and/or a refocusing of the organization. Thus, collaborative efforts cannot be successful if those involved do not have the power to make the necessary decisions to move the effort forward.

Factors: Process and Contextual

The Contextual and Process Factors represent elements that can either enhance or inhibit collaborations and ultimately the desired outcomes. Contextual Factors are conditions that exist or are lacking within an environment which can enhance or inhibit collaborations. Process Factors focus on the how to aspect of the collaboration and cover specific skills and components that are necessary to build effective working relationships. The Process Factors are embedded within the context of the community. Therefore, the relationship between Contextual Factors and Process Factors is reciprocal and mutually influential.

The dynamic interaction among these factors determines the possibility of having a successful collaboration. In order to prepare for possible obstacles and pitfalls, the Contextual Factors can be evaluated before forming/developing a collaboration, while the Process Factors cannot be assessed until the group begins.

Contextual Factors are characteristics of the ecology/environment that are related to the effectiveness of a collaboration. Ecology, here, includes but is not limited to the physical and structural settings of the community, (e.g., resources available in the community), and the social context (e.g., political atmosphere). The collaboration may be able to influence these characteristics, but the group does not have control over them. There are six Contextual Factors: Connectedness; History of Working Together; Political Climate; Policies/Laws/Regulations; Resources; and Catalysts.
Connectedness Factor. Connectedness refers to the linkages between individuals, groups, and organizations, that is, how people know each other or how they are connected to one another. There are multiple types of connections that are not mutually exclusive. These types of connection include: individual, group, community, and networks. People are drawn together socially through organizations and groups, and by informal and/or formal rules, resources, and relationships. An example of individual connection would be two individuals who are drawn together because of a social history that is not related to their careers or employment. Thus, on an individual level, Connectedness can be measured on whether an individual feels a linkage or bond with another individual. On a group level, people feel that they have associations or a sense of belonging to different groups and organizations. At the community level, Connectedness refers to universally understood principles and values of the community. Finally, one can get a measure of communication by examining whether there are 'natural' networks of information exchange at each level and across the three levels. These networks may be formal and/or informal, but they provide an established pattern of communication at each of the levels—individuals, groups, communities—and across them. Collaborations that employ both the formal and informal networks of communication to support them are more likely to succeed. For example, a collaboration that uses positive media (formal communication) (1) establishes the collaboration, (2) provides credibility, and (3) promotes their shared vision.

History of Working Together/Customs Factor. History, here, has to do with a community's past with regards to working cooperatively or competitively. Collaboration is more likely to succeed in communities that have a history of working together cooperatively (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Usually, in communities where there is a long history of cooperation, there exists a corresponding history of solving problems. These communities work on difficult issues by employing the available resources and developing creative, community-wide solutions based on the desired outcomes. Moreover, in communities where a history of cooperation exists, the collaboration members trust each other and the collaboration process. Finally, the power structure of the community also demonstrates the history of working together for the shared values of the community. In communities where a competitive history exists, it might be useful to implement education programs for potential collaborators regarding the benefits, costs, and processes of collaboration. Collaborations succeed in an environment that is oriented toward cooperation and away from competition.

Political Climate Factor. Political Climate is the history and environment of the power structure. Ask the questions: does a collaborative relationship exist among the key power people and decision makers in the community? Does the collaboration's shared vision have pooled political support? When working in environments that are disadvantaged, is there ownership of the plight of the citizens by power? Are they committed to support necessary change? Are there key power brokers open to hearing problems of the traditionally disfranchised? Widespread political support is important in developing and sustaining collaborations, particularly with regards to policy making and implementation in various arenas. In collaborative political climates, there is a demonstrated willingness to accept and
negotiate new ideas, to navigate through conflict, and to be open toward emerging trends. Moreover, it is important that a collaboration has members who know which decision makers need to be influenced and how to influence those decision makers. There is a recognition of traditional leaders and an understanding of traditional patterns of authority. Collaborations that have the support and endorsement of key power people and/or groups are more likely to be effective. Thus, the leadership of a successful collaboration exhibits effective political involvement.

Policies/Laws/Regulations Factor. Solving problems collaboratively means transforming and changing policies, laws and regulations. Indeed, policies, laws and regulations represent all the concepts and activities that are used to resolve problems. Collaborations are more likely to succeed when supportive policies, laws, and regulations are in place. This is especially true with regard to the policies and regulations within the collaborating members' groups and/or organizations, contributors, and the people using the service. Policies, laws, and regulations contribute to the political climate, but also directly affect the environment. Thus, whether systems and their structures, norms, and decision-making processes are open and supportive of collaboration depends in part on policies, laws, and regulations. Sustainability of collaborations is in some ways dependent on policies and practices in place.

Resources Factor. Within a collaboration resources refer to four types of capital: Environmental, in-kind, financial, and human. Much of what has already been presented has to do with environmental capital. The ecology can promote collaborations or it can discourage them. An environment where there is Connectedness at all levels, a history of working together, a supportive political climate, and policies, laws, and regulations that encourage cooperativeness, increases the probability of a successful collaboration. In-kind capital has to do with what the collaboration members and their organizations contribute to the collaboration, such as meeting rooms, physical supplies, and computers. Financial capital involves monetary resources, which are often assumed to be most important. Note, however, that collaborations that cooperate only to seek funding are more likely to fail than collaborations that form as comprehensive community wide responses to a problem. Human capital involves the investment of people's time, expertise and energy into a collaboration, which is an essential contribution to achieving the collaboration's shared vision. Each collaboration member and organization demonstrates commitment to the collaboration by contributing and/or realigning resources to the collaboration.

Catalysts Factor. Catalysts get the collaboration started. The problem(s) addressed or the reason(s) for the collaboration to exist must be viewed by the community and potential collaboration members as a situation that requires a comprehensive response. In this way, the problem(s) or reason(s) are the catalyst. For example, before the prevention of youth violence can be an issue to collaborate around, the community must view youth as having skills and gifts that can enhance the quality of life in the community. In addition to a community wide issue, the second type of catalyst needed is a convener. This is the person who calls the initial meeting of a collaboration and draws everyone into a dialogue about
possible solutions to the situation. If the collaboration is going to move forward and establish a shared vision, the person who convenes the collaborative group must be respected and viewed as a "legitimate" player. Conveners must have organizational and interpersonal skills, and must carry out the role with passion and fairness.

**Process Factors** deal with the specific skills and/or components necessary to build effective working relationships. Six process factors have been identified: Understanding the Community; Community Development; Leadership; Communication; Research and Evaluation; and Sustainability. Each of these process factors covers a broad range of skills or tasks that impact the collaboration process.

**Understanding the Community Factor.** An in-depth analysis of the community provides the foundation for effective collaboration. It allows the practitioner to gain a sense of the vision the community has for itself and the underlying values of the citizenry. A close look at the community helps to identify those individuals in the community who have power and those who have gifts. Potential audiences will be identified. Potential collaborators will be discovered and potential turf battles will be identified. The practitioner will also recognize the diversity of strengths and weaknesses in the community that will influence the success of the collaboration and will develop a clear view of the overall strengths and not focus on weaknesses as it relates to serving the needs of children, youth and families.

**Community Development Factor.** Community development is the process of mobilizing communities to address important issues. The natural communication systems and formal information channels enable one to begin the process of exploring issues, goals and objectives. The collaboration begins the process of defining its vision, mission, values, principles and outcomes within the context of the attitudes, norms, beliefs and values of the larger community. Efforts begin to build teamwork and mobilize resources (revenue, time, and people) to overcome potential barriers and begin to mobilize the citizenry to institute change. While mainstream collaborative efforts begin with the process outlined, a sense of trust is critical to successful community development strategies. Citizens often see the language of collaboration in rhetoric, with actions not rooted in actual and long-lived community development.

**Leadership Factor.** Community collaboration requires effective leadership. One of the major responsibilities of leadership is to assure that appropriate members have been brought to the collaboration. This membership should encompass potentially impacted groups and individuals. Collaborative efforts should provide for youth and adult partnerships. Norms of operation must be established which include protocol, conflict resolution, political and cultural sensitivity, structure and roles and responsibilities. Leadership should facilitate team building and capitalize upon diversity, and individual group and organizational strengths.
Communication Factor. Collaborative efforts are dependent upon open and clear communication. Norms of communicating must be established which assure "language usage" which is acceptable to all members. Terminology must be clarified so that shared meaning can occur. A formal process for communication between meetings must be established (e.g., weekly phone calls, mailings, faxed updates). Communication from the collaboration to the broader community must be established. This may involve the development of working relationships with the media and other formal information channels. Establishing and maintaining non-formal communication channels with local community leaders will also be essential. Marketing of the collaboration efforts must also be conducted in order to obtain community support and acquisition of needed resources.

Research and Evaluation Factor. Obtaining and utilizing information is essential for collaborative groups. The effect of meeting the desired outcomes is the primary objective of a collaboration evaluation. Data must be collected which establish benchmarks for future impact and outcome analysis. Reviewing examples of other successful models of collaboration will help in adopting or customizing a collaboration model. Evaluation efforts are essential to monitor progress related to the group's goals and objectives and make modifications where necessary. Numerous methodologies may be employed in this process including quantitative, qualitative, and participatory strategies. Strategies for communicating program impacts must be established.

Sustainability Factor. In order for collaborative efforts to be sustainable, it is essential that systems be instituted to provide sustained membership, resources, and strategic program planning. This will involve membership guidelines relating to terms of office and replacement of members. Formal operational agreements may be necessary. Resource development efforts must be ongoing to assure that the appropriate level of revenue, time and people are available to conduct the group's programming efforts. Planning must be both short-term and long-term. The collaboration must be able to identify emerging trends and issues and develop strategies for needed expansion.

Conclusion

As the challenges facing children, youth, families, and communities change, so do the needs and resources of collaborations. It is unrealistic to expect that one style of collaboration will be effective. The community has its own unique culture and, within that, several subcultures, each with their own patterns of process and communication. The level of linkages and the factors outlined in this manuscript are important concepts to assess at various stages during a community group’s development. Whether one is working with an existing collaboration or developing a new one, communication within the collaboration and with those affected by the collaboration is critical. Using the levels of linkage and the factors as a focus of discussions may reduce fragmentation within the group and move group conversation from polite discussion to skillful dialog, sound decision-making, and action. Open and honest
dialog within the group contributes to the distribution of power in the group while increasing self-discipline and commitment. It also assists with viewing issues and problems in a holistic approach. These concepts are based on collaboration members’ perceptions and with the self-evaluation tools presented provide a guide for collaboration members to critically examine their group; it is not a rigid methodology. It is based on respecting and valuing the community culture; the commitment people have in the quality of life for individuals, their families, and groups working together.

To echo the sentiments of Goodlad (1994), the continued existence of good communities depends heavily on the nature of the connections between parts of its community ecosystem. For a community to be very good, the components parts of this ecosystem must be attentive to their role in community-wide efforts on behalf of children, youth, and families (Perkins, Ferrari, Covey, & Keith, 1994). Collaborations are often a practical approach to reducing fragmentation of community relationships and to build the capacity of children, youth, and families. We hope that through sharing the concepts and methods of assessment related to the levels of linkages and the process and Contextual factors other collaborations will be aided in their quest to contribute to the solutions that address the issues facing children, youth, families, and communities.

References


