

# Partnerships, Collaborations and Alliances Managing for Success

Collaborate:

1. To work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort.
2. To cooperate reasonably, as with an enemy occupation force in one's country.

Partnership:

A relationship between individuals or groups that is characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility, as for the achievement of a specified goal

Alliance:

A close association of nations or other groups, formed to advance common interests or causes.

Dictionary.com

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

Increasingly, within the social services sector, government is pushing a partnership agenda. (Atkinson (2005)) Much work is accomplished by two or more agencies, each with its own mandate, governance and management structure working together to implement a program or idea. In spite of years of operating in this manner the social service sector has had mixed results when engaging in collaborative ventures. This paper will briefly examine the benefits and limitations of collaboration, describe the collaborative cycle, outline the attributes of managers that will improve opportunities for successful collaborative ventures. The research will be used to develop a framework for collaboration. Three partnerships within The County of Brant, Ontario will be evaluated using the framework. Finally this research will be used to draw conclusions about leadership styles which are best suited to managing collaborative ventures and identify further research opportunities in this area.

## **BACKGROUND:**

A simple indication of the significance of partnering in the public sector can be gleaned from utilizing the Province of Ontario's website search engine. Requesting "partnership" documents results in more than 20,000 "hits." The results come from all levels of government and non-profits. The following are just a few of the titles:

- CAMH (2003) – Commitment to Communities and Partnerships
- Ontario Human Rights Commission Announces Partnerships on Human Rights Projects;
- Ontario Native Affairs – The Power of Partnerships: New Opportunities for Aboriginal People;
- Evaluation of the Social Development Partnerships Program;
- Community Partnerships: What are Community Policing Partnerships?
- Labour Market Partnerships.

However, dig deeper and there appears to be a fundamental lack of explicit understanding of the benefits of collaboration and the skills needed to make collaboration successful. Partnering seems to be a reaction to stakeholder pressure, the complexity of the service system or the interrelatedness of similar organizations. The following statements, describing why departments and agencies are engaging in collaborative efforts provide insufficient rationale for undertaking a costly and time-consuming service delivery mechanism.

- The Ontario Human Rights Commission's stated rationale for partnerships: "Working with partners is a key part of the Commission's public education strategy and has been clearly identified by stakeholders as something the Commission must do more of."

- CAMH (2003) (The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health) states: “Our commitment to partnerships is connected to our holistic view of health - a multi-dimensional approach that recognizes the importance of excellent health care services, as well as friends, family, housing, a job and adequate income to overall well-being.”
- “Citizenship and Immigration Canada recognizes that the key to an effective and dynamic foreign student program is in strong partnerships with provincial education authorities, institutions and educational organizations.”

More disconcerting is the seeming lack of understanding of what “partnership” means. The Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership appears to simply be a “trade organization” in which tourism operators join a provincial body to promote their services. The Ministry of Public Infrastructure Renewal provides funds to local organizations to improve sports culture and tourism facilities. It seems this is little more than a funding relationship that is labelled a partnership.

There is much to recommend collaboration in attaining positive social outcomes:

- Page (2004) indicates that collaborative efforts allow for creativity in problem solving through the sharing of resources (political, financial and in-kind), ideas and information.
- Groark & McCall point out that partnerships create shared ownership of issues, increasing the number of individuals acting as ambassadors for a program and improving “fundability.”
- Leone et al (2002) describe the improved understanding and relationships between agencies as a major benefit of partnerships.
- Leone et al (2002) argue that collaboration leads to service delivery that is less fragmented, more responsive (offering more, and more specialized services) and more accessible.
- Johnson et al (2003) argue that collaboration creates cooperation which can reduce the level of competition between agencies that they see as a threat to the entire service system.
- Daka-Mulwanda et al (1995) argue that collaboration increases the likelihood that the Children’s Services System will be able to meet a family’s needs.

All of these benefits are attributed to the sharing of responsibility through partnerships. Whether one agrees with these endorsements or not, it seems that social service agencies are leaping into these arrangements, sometimes willingly and other times under duress (Atkinson (2005)). Lyons (2004) refers to the pressure by government to force human services agencies into collaborative arrangements. He defines collaboration as “an unnatural act between unconsenting adults.” So although collaborative arrangements have much to recommend them, they also face a number of challenges that should cause sober second thoughts for those entertaining plans to partner with others.

*“experience on the ground to date of local collaboration is of great complexity, of multiple agencies at different levels planning, consulting and acting in different time frames, and sometimes of simple mess and frustration.” (Craig (2004))*

Attributes of the project, the partners or the systems in which they operate can make partnering difficult or impossible. Some of the challenges researchers warn about include:

- The need to sacrifice independence, control and recognition (Groark & McCall (1996))
- Attitudes held by partners about each other (Groark & McCall (1996))
- Greater complexity, loss of autonomy and differing knowledge bases (Mohr & Spekman)
- Greater time requirement (Leone et al (2002), Roberts (2004))
- Lack of common language and understanding (Leone et al (2002))

In order for collaborative ventures to be successful, partners must understand what they mean by partnership, clearly articulate the goals of the partnership and avoid many common pitfalls. If these conditions are met agencies can substantially improve services, however failing this, partnerships can at best end up a dismal waste of time and at worst ruin relationships and undermine the effectiveness of the service system.

### **THE COLLABORATIVE CYCLE**

Simonin (1997) describes a four part cycle for collaboration:

1. Identify and select potential collaborators
2. Negotiate the terms and structure of the agreement
3. Monitor and manage the collaborative
4. Terminate the arrangement

Leone et al (2002) present a three step model for collaboration:

1. Jointly develop and agree to a set of common goals and directions;
2. Share responsibility for obtaining goals; and
3. Work together to achieve the goals.

Combining these two models provides the following comprehensive framework for potential collaborators:

1. Plan and prepare:
  - a. Select partners
  - b. Select projects

- c. Develop formal agreement
    - i. Goals of collaboration
    - ii. Responsibilities of partners
    - iii. Dispute resolution mechanisms
2. Monitor and manage the arrangement
  - a. Share responsibility
  - b. Work cooperatively
3. Terminate the agreement
  - a. Formally end the relationship
  - b. Evaluate the relationship
  - c. Develop “lessons learned.”

***Preparation and Partnership selection:***

Melaville & Blank (1991) caution that the climate in which the partnership begins will affect the entire life of that partnership. Careful pre-planning is the key to successful collaborative outcomes. Pre-planning includes selecting appropriate partners and appropriate projects, establishing goals and objectives, anticipating and developing strategies to mitigate challenges and identifying conflict resolution techniques. Simonin (1997) advises that the first steps to successful collaboration are the identification of partners and establishing a written agreement about the scope and content of the collaborative venture. Leone agrees that it is important to clearly establish shared goals for the collaboration before beginning the work.

Many social service agencies have internal processes that do not easily accommodate partnerships. Ridgely et al (1998) suggest that an important preparatory step to partnering is reconciling differences in philosophy, organizational structure, funding models and legislative requirements. Differences in philosophy might include acceptance of funding sources (for example an agency with a policy against accepting gaming revenues might not be able to partner with an agency that receives funds from the provincial lottery corporation); moral issues such as the right to choice – right to life debate or universal versus targeted service delivery. Something as simple as a difference in fiscal year could become a structural barrier to partnering for some agencies.

Selecting a partner is an important preparatory step. Partners should have common decision making and accountability mechanisms, strong communication skills and use common language. Each member must bring complementary skills to the partnership. Mohr & Spekman (1994) indicate that trust is an important factor in selecting a partner and that where partners trust one another (“believe one another’s word to be reliable”) they will experience improved communication, manage stress better and be more adaptable.

Understanding the partner agency’s policies and culture is an important first step in selecting a partner. It also increases the chances that the collaborative venture will be

accepted among agency staff. (Johnson et al (2003)) Agencies with dissimilar policies and culture may face significant challenges in partnering.

The public sector has a number of hierarchical structures that make it a challenging partner for social service agencies. While partnerships benefit from speedy decision making and high levels of discretion from involved individuals, the public sector's hierarchy and risk aversion tend to inhibit decision making.(Page (2004)) For an agency accustomed to rapid problem solving, a partnership with government may prove to be too much of a challenge to overcome.

A number of researchers speak to the need for effective communication strategies (Page (2004), Johnson et al (2003), Mohr & Spekman.) One of the major inhibitors of effective communication is lack of common definitions, (Slayton (2000)) and the use of specific terminology or acronyms that is not shared or fully understood by both partners. (Leone et al (2002)) Establishing the mechanisms by which members of the collaboration will communicate and developing a shared lexicon is a critical first step in collaborating. Johnson et al (2003) support this, indicating that excessive use of jargon inhibits effective partnerships.

An agency should also consider what it needs from partners prior to engaging them. Unless the partner provides an added value, there is little point in pursuing time consuming collaborative strategies. One of the primary goals of collaborating is to bring different skills sets and resources together. (Groark & McCall (1996)) The contributions of partners may be staff skills, tangible resources (i.e. office space or technology) relationships (i.e. connections to funders or client groups) or other means of leveraging funds, political clout or expertise. *“Collaborations work best when the partners can achieve something together that they could not attain alone.”* (Groark & McCall (1996))

Mohr & Spekman (1994) refer to this as “interdependence.” They state that to be effective both agencies must understand that there is mutual benefit from the collaboration. All partners must perceive that the autonomy they lose as a result of the partnership will be compensated for by the benefits they gain from working collaboratively.

Not every project is ideally suited to be collaborative implementation. Kanter (1990) suggests that the key to effective partnering is to select projects that are well suited to collaborative service delivery. The project should be of sufficient importance to the agency to warrant significant investment of time, money and attention.

Lack of sufficient funding or flexibility in funding is a barrier to successful collaborations. (Leone et al (2002), Johnston et al (2003)) If none of the partners in a collaborative have enough funds to implement the project, the project is a poor candidate for implementation. Restricted funding may limit the ability of the partnership to be creative. Where possible, funding should be available to offset the increased time commitment that is required to manage the partnership.

### ***Monitor and Manage the Collaboration:***

Neither staff nor management can make a venture successful without the commitment and support of the other. Agencies need to involve a key manager who understands agency priorities and positions; is authorized to make decisions and commit resources on behalf of the agency and is able to provide direct assistance in the event of a problem. Additionally they require the commitment of the staff who will implement the project. (Johnson et al (2003)).

Leone et al (2002) suggest that to be successful there must be commitment from all levels of each organization and between organizations including policy makers and leadership, management and staff. They add two other needed levels of acceptance: They suggest that members of professions that are involved in the collaboration need to be committed to it and that the collaboration needs to be acceptable to the client group.

Johnson et al (2003) indicated that the commitment of management staff is critical to the venture: *“the success or failure of an interagency collaboration is dependent on the commitment of key decision makers who are truly representative of the collaborating agencies.”* The involved managers should have authority to make decisions on behalf of their agencies, be committed to the outcomes and fully understand their agency’s position on significant issues.

Collaborative ventures benefit greatly from an inclusive management style using tools such as: participatory decision making processes, consultation, empowerment and learning teams (Page (2004)). This management style improves the level of commitment and support from partner agency staff, a key feature of successful partnerships (Johnson et al (2003)).

Staff resistance to change is a major barrier to successful collaboration. (Johnson et al (2003)) Leone et al (2002) acknowledge that to be successful the partnership must be recognized at the staff level, both within the agency and between agencies. Collaboration will require that staff change their routines and professional practices. (Leone et al (2002)) Collaboration will take more time than “doing it alone.” Expecting staff and managers to work in partnerships without allocating additional time and support is not reasonable and might destine a partnership to failure. (Leone et al (2002)).

Managing the relationship, through good and bad is a critical factor in the implementation of collaborative efforts. How partners relate to one another and manage conflict has major implications for the success of the venture.

At some time in a partnership, if all partners are fully engaged, there is bound to be conflict. Mohr & Spekman (1994) acknowledge that occasionally outside arbitration may be necessary to resolve conflict, however, they advise that repeated use of arbitration generally correlates with more serious conflict, dissatisfaction with the results and

breakdown of the relationship. Both smoothing over issues and aggressively arguing with one another are “negatively associated with satisfaction”. (Mohr & Spekman) Successful conflict resolution is managed through joint problem solving between the partners.

### ***Termination and Evaluation***

Partnerships need not, and in fact should not, continue indefinitely. The partnership agreement should state clearly the scope of the arrangement including the anticipated termination plan for the arrangement. The partnership may be time – limited (i.e. a 1 year period) or may relate to the completion of a project (i.e. the completion of a report.) Participants should ensure that the end of the partnering arrangement is acknowledged and that all the partners agree and understand that the collaborative venture has completed its mandate.

Once the venture has completed its mandate, it is imperative that the project be evaluated, not only from the perception of the project outcomes but from the perspective of the value, strengths and weaknesses of the collaborative delivery mechanism. Simonin (1997) states: “*The high rate of alliance failure constitutes strong evidence that collaborative know how is also rarer than collaborative experience,*” and goes on to discuss the importance of strategically learning from these experiences: “*previous collaborative experience alone does not ensure that a firm will benefit from a collaboration. That is, experience is only valuable if the lessons of this experience (both positive and negative) are internalized by the firm and drawn into specific know-how that can be used to guide future actions.*”

Often managers monitor only the program outcomes, without considering the interagency relationships that contributed to those outcomes. Simonin (1997) describes the areas that should be considered in evaluating the collaboration:

- Developing skills in identifying partners
- Negotiating and developing collaboration agreements
- Monitoring collaborative projects
- Assessing the timing of the termination of the agreement
- Transferring knowledge between partners.

It is not enough to review these issues. The recommendations that arise must be internalized and utilized in later collaborative arrangements. (Simonin (1997)) Without this introspection, agencies are doomed to repeatedly make the same errors in future collaborative relationships.

### **BEST (AND WORST) PRACTICES IN PARTNERSHIPS**

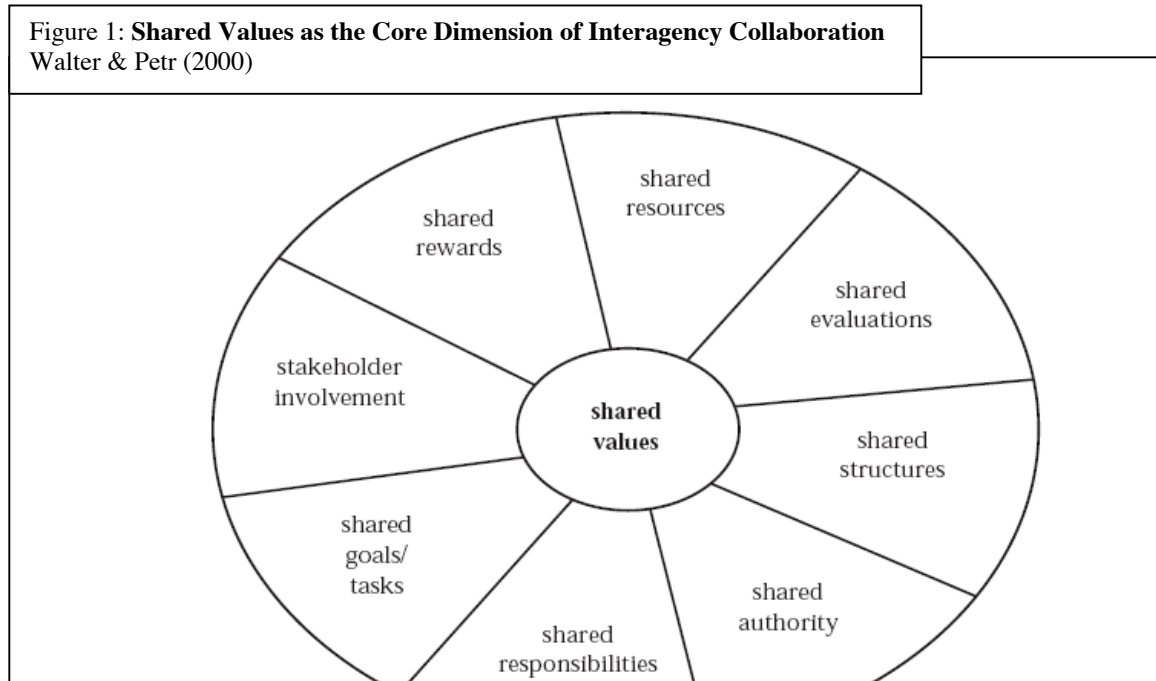
#### ***Turf Protection Versus Shared Values:***

Agencies and managers often work to protect what they perceive as their 'turf.' They do this for a number of reasons. They may perceive their method of service delivery is best for the people they serve and that other agencies will not do as good a job; they may be dependent upon a certain population segment to raise money for their agency or they may be concerned that competition will hurt them. Ridgely et al (1998) point out that turf protection may be a survival mechanism for agencies. *“Due to providers' concerns about scarce resources, requests for collaboration often are seen as attempts to encroach on another's turf.”* Regardless of the reasons behind turf protection it is often cited as a barrier to effective collaboration.

Daka-Mulwanda et al (1995) cite turf protection at the political, professional and bureaucratic level as a significant issue. *“A barrier exists when collaborators are reluctant to give up what they perceive as their territory.”*

Turf protection is also practiced at a staff level. Staff members may guard their area of expertise for fear of losing a job, losing power or status or because they feel ownership for a certain task or client group. Johnson et al (2003) recommend that prior to engaging in a collaborative venture the manager must predict which turf issues might arise within their staff and develop strategies to address them. To overcome staff level turf protection issues, Johnson et al (2003) recommend that managers highlight the potential benefits of the collaboration; remind staff of previous successful ventures and ensure that effective participation in collaborative ventures is recognized and ineffective or sabotaging behaviours are punished.

Many researchers agree that shared values are critical to the success of partnerships. Walter & Petr (2000) describe shared values as the core dimension of successful collaboration. (see figure 1) It is the sharing of values that they perceive as leading to shared rewards; resources; evaluation; structures; authority; responsibilities; goals & tasks. These shared values are also the key to obtaining effective stakeholder involvement.



### ***Management and agency attributes:***

A number of researchers caution that having a common value is not sufficient for successful outcomes. Even where managers agree on values, some management styles are ill suited to sharing responsibility and authority: Some managers need to “*maintain rigid personal control over the activities of the agency, the staff, and the clients, even at the expense of best practices and innovations.*” (Groark and McCall) Johnson warns of the risks associated with following one’s own agenda at the expense of the collaborative. Leone et al (2002) suggest that decision making may be based upon the needs of the agency, not the needs of the client group or the goals of the collaborative.

Page (2004) argues that collaborations will function more effectively “*under low-control accountability relationships based on professional norms and politics than under high-control relationships that employ legal or hierarchical authority.*” Those leaders who engage their staff and communicate clear vision are more likely to be successful collaborators.

Groark and McCall suggest that good collaborative leaders are:

1. Motivating
2. Fair
  - a. Ensure all sides of an issue are presented
  - b. Identify “common ground”
  - c. Identify alternative solutions
3. Neutral – ideally located outside of the vested interests

Johnson et al (2003) suggest that if an agency does not support the collaborative it will likely fail. They list some of the behaviours that are most often associated with failed partnerships:

1. Following one’s own agenda at the expense of the collaborative
2. Lack of willingness to examine agency policies to determine the impact of them on partnering and to amend those that have a negative impact.
3. Not supporting a collaborative venture by providing incentives for behaviours supporting the collaborative or sanctions for those that oppose collaboration.

### ***Staff Attributes:***

Staff ultimately implement the collaborative plans outlined by management. Groark and McCall suggest that team members of successful collaborations:

1. Provide a variety of expertise (i.e. research, administration, service delivery, management, fund-raising, etc.)
2. Have loyalty and commitment to the project
3. Are able to share control, responsibility and credit

### ***Systemic Barriers to Collaboration***

In spite of the public sector agenda of enhancing partnerships, government bureaucracy and system rules create a number of systemic barriers to collaboration.

While government promotes collaboration, it often establishes processes that are competitive, not only for funds, but for prioritization for government attention and time. *“In New Zealand, for example, government in social and health sectors seems to want both community partnership and local competitive contractualism, which creates tensions between community groups expected to both cooperate and compete at the same time. In this situation, lack of clear devolved structural parameters gets turned into interpersonal conflict between organisation representatives.”* (Craig (2004))

Communication between government policy makers and service providers is critical to successful collaborations. (Johnson et al (2003)) Lack of communication or inconsistent communication over time or between partnering agencies creates major tensions within the partnership.

Confidentiality, has become a major concern. Inability to share information is a major barrier to collaboration. (Daka-Mulwanda et al (1995)) To be successful at collaboration, agencies must find respectful ways to share information.

### ***Collaboration Meets Accountability:***

Page (2004) provides insight into managing accountability in collaboration. This is an area where two public management trends intersect. *“Interagency collaboratives are likely to be central to the current trend toward accountability for results because most results of any public significance are beyond the capacity of any single agency, whether public or nongovernmental, to achieve on its own.”*

When one of the partners is a government department it must consider whether or not the relationship will bear the scrutiny of public accountability. Government must follow appropriate due process to guarantee citizens appropriate service delivery. They must follow laws and procedures set out explicitly to ensure these rights. (Page (2004)) Collaborations work best when managers have discretion with which to negotiate. (Page (2004)) This conflicts with the strict hierarchical structure in which governments function to meet the need for public accountability. Page (2004) argues that New Public Management may allow for greater management discretion by holding managers accountable for outcomes rather than compliance, thereby increasing the opportunities for government to be a more successful collaborator.

One strategy used to maintain accountability in non-traditional practices is the extensive use of public consultation. (Page (2004)) Using this strategy ensures that the manager is accountable to the stakeholders who were consulted in arriving at a position.

## **A FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATION:**

Combining the recommendations of researchers creates a framework for collaboration that can be used by managers in creating collaborative relationships or in evaluating past collaborative projects to learn from them.

### **PRE-PLANNING:**

#### **Select Partners:**

A. Identify barriers to partnership:

Legislative and policy

Philosophical

Values and culture

Management style (control)

B. Evaluate:

Communication style

Decision making style

Accountability mechanisms

Interagency trust

Value added

#### **Select Project:**

Project must merit prioritization

Sufficient funding

#### **Document Partnership Agreement:**

Decision making process

Conflict resolution techniques

Time lines and scope of project

Partner contributions

## **MONITORING AND MANAGING**

#### **Share Responsibility:**

Delegate to staff

Communicate clearly

Involve key decision makers

#### **Use Inclusive Management Style**

Participatory decision making

Consultation

Learning Teams

**Remove obstacles:**

Reward collaborative behaviour

Penalize destructive behaviour

Evaluate policies

**Conflict Management:**

Identify conflict

Use joint problem solving

Use mediation sparingly

**Measure outcomes****TERMINATION AND EVALUATION****Conclude Collaboration:**

Acknowledge project end

Celebrate success

**Evaluate:**

Learn from collaboration

Identify challenges

Identify strengths & benefits

**Make Use of Learning:**

Identify potential changes in collaborative arrangements for future ventures.

**Accountability:**

Report outcomes to stakeholders

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## **USING THE FRAMEWORK TO EVALUATE THE BRANT EXPERIENCE:**

The framework is use to evaluate three projects that have had varying levels of success. The evaluation will consider how the project implementation compares to the framework. The three examples will be used to demonstrate the implications of adhering to the framework or of deviating from it. The samples will also be used to raise questions for further reflection.

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### ***CASE 1: Contact Brant – Woodview Waiting List Project***

#### **Reason for selection:**

This project has been highly successful as judged by the positive outcome (the elimination of the Child and Family Counselling Waiting List and the high level of satisfaction of all partners.)

#### **Pre-Planning:**

##### *Partner Selection:*

- Agencies chose to partner because the issue was of shared concern and each partner provided something that the other could not.
- High level of trust between partners
- Joint planning involving staff at all organization levels

##### *Project Selection:*

- Waiting list identified as a concern and a strategic priority for both agencies and for the Children's Services System.
- Both agencies made the commitment to changing practices and accepting increased workloads
- Management and Board of both agencies tracked project progress

##### *Formal Agreement:*

- Neither agency requested a formal agreement, however, the project involves a research component. The researcher documented the project, providing a clear breakdown or responsibilities for both agencies.

#### **Monitoring and Managing:**

##### *Share Responsibility:*

- Every staff member participated in implementation

- Clear communication about expectation occurred regularly between partners and within agencies
- Front-line staff and management interacted extensively in problem solving

*Inclusive Management Style:*

- Staff of both organizations are involved in problem solving
- Staff are given professional discretion to act “outside” of the project boundaries

*Remove Barriers to Collaboration:*

- Data entry systems were adapted to accommodate project
- Intake procedures were adapted
- Counselling options were changed

*Conflict Resolution*

- Joint problem solving, including team meetings, teleconferences and brainstorming sessions were used.

**Termination and Evaluation:**

This project is not yet complete. At this time it does not have an “end date” or a statement with regards to when it will be considered complete. There are some natural timelines for ending the project, related to the research. (The completion of 63, one-year follow up interviews.)

The research component of the project provides the evaluation. This includes: the accuracy of Contact Brant’s triage process (fidelity to the model), the changes in family mental health functioning (maternal depression index), and the number of children waiting for service.

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**CASE 2:     *Protecting Vulnerable Adults***

A Partnership between Developmental Service Providers & Retirement home operators

**Reason for selection:**

This project was greeted with great excitement however failed to produce any tangible benefits.

**Pre-Planning:**

*Partner Selection:*

- Agencies chose to partner because the issue was of shared concern and was high profile at the time
- Partnership arranged between Executive Director of Contact Brant and Executive Director of Brant Community Care Access Centre (CCAC)
- The two most-involved agencies did not have a significant relationship prior to the implementation of this project.
- Other participants were invited.

*Project Selection:*

- Addressing the sub-standard living conditions of lodging homes where developmentally delayed individuals live, was considered a priority for the Developmental Service Sector.
- The CCAC was under pressure to respond to the publicized abuses within nursing homes in Brant.
- There was no funding for this project

*Formal Agreement:*

- No agreement was drawn up.
- The priorities for the CCAC and Contact Brant were different.
- The project was rushed in order to hold the forum while the public interest in the Nursing Home story remained high

**Monitoring and Managing:**

*Share Responsibility:*

- Neither staff nor management of other agencies were involved in implementation
- There was a perceived power imbalance between the leaders (the CCAC and Contact Brant) and the implementers – (the Retirement Home operators and the Developmental Service providers)

*Inclusive Management Style:*

- A forum was held where participants were invited to recommend solutions and join committees to implement solutions.
- Agency staff who were not in attendance at the forum were nominated to head committees.

*Remove Barriers to Collaboration:*

- A number of agencies that perceived themselves to have overlapping mandates were outraged at not being included.
- Committee mandates were changed to accommodate these “late arrivals.” The committee mandates became watered down.

*Conflict Resolution*

- There was no conflict resolution mechanism. Conflict led to the cessation of meetings. Consequently there have been no results from the initiative.

**Termination and Evaluation:**

There was no formal acknowledgement that this partnership had ended. Each committee slowly withered as meetings were cancelled, minutes were not completed, action items were not followed up.

The role of the collaboration in the failure of this initiative has not been evaluated.

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### ***CASE 3: Community Food Advisor Program***

A Partnership between The Willett Hospital and the Brant County Health Unit (BCHU)

#### **Reason for selection:**

This project had mixed results. Initially it met with great success, however the initial positive results dimmed and eventually the project 'died.'

#### **Pre-Planning:**

##### *Partner Selection:*

- Agencies chose to partner because of what each partner offered and what the program would provide to those agencies. BCHU offered a dietician and wanted to implement the Community Food Advisor Program to increase the public awareness of healthy eating and safe food handling. The Willett Hospital was able to access the funding and wished to expand its role in health promotion
- The agencies and individuals had previously had positive collaborative working arrangements and trusted one another.

##### *Project Selection:*

- Funding was available to implement the project
- The project met goals within both agencies
- The project built upon existing skills and mandates within both organizations.

##### *Formal Agreement:*

- The application for funding formed a formal agreement between the partners, outlining the commitment and responsibilities of each agency.

#### **Monitoring and Managing:**

##### *Share Responsibility:*

- Both agencies were involved in selecting and supervising staff
- Resources were shared
- Both agencies provided in-kind contributions including office space, supervision, phone lines, support staff, information resources, promotions

*Inclusive Management Style:*

- The project staff was expanded to include the Dietician of The Willett Hospital.
- No other staff members were included from either organization.
- The volunteers were active team members.

*Remove Barriers to Collaboration:*

- Authority to work on this project was delegated to lower management staff within both agencies

*Conflict Resolution:*

- There was no built in conflict resolution model.

**Termination and Evaluation:**

Initially this project was a great success. Volunteers were trained and began to provide information sessions in the community. The volunteers were intended to become self-sufficient in time, with decreasing resources provided by each agency. As the agencies withdrew support however, the volunteers began to lose interest and slowly the program faded.

There were numerous efforts to reengage volunteers, and there was an evaluation of the project, however there was no review of the partnership and no formal “end-date.



## **IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS:**

Ultimately managers must determine when to partner and how to adjust their management style to improve the chance of success. The most significant implication for managers is that they must actively manage their collaborations. Additionally, however, managers should be aware of their own management styles and determine whether or not they are well suited to engage in partnerships. At this time there is tremendous pressure from funders, community members, other agencies and consumers of services to work together. Given this environment, it is in the best interest of managers to work to increase their competence in managing inter-agency relationships. However it is also important for managers to know when to say no! Not every partner is a good partner and not every project will benefit from collaboration.

### ***Managing the Collaboration:***

Managers are accustomed to managing staff and managing projects, however many give little thought to managing the structure within which projects are completed and the staff work. When working with other agencies, managers must attend to the relationship with partner agencies as much as they attend to the work of the project.

To be most successful, time and resources must be spent establishing the relationship between partners. Managers need to take the same care in selecting partners as they do in selecting new staff members. They need to determine that the partner is someone they can work with and trust. They need to determine that the partner does not pose a threat to their agency's autonomy and ensure that they are not seen as a threat to the other agency.

The partners must formalize their relationship with a written agreement. The agreement should specify the roles and responsibilities of each agency, the scope of the project including timelines for completion, conflict resolution mechanisms and goals of the collaborative venture. The partners need to anticipate disagreements and agree to a process to resolve any disputes when they arise.

The three case studies presented suggest that an agreement often happens by chance rather than design. In two of the three cases the agreement was implied within another document – research project design in one instance and an application for funding in another. Beneficial further research might consider the frequency with which these “accidental” agreements occur and their sufficiency to manage partnerships.

Once the project is underway, managers must continue to monitor the partnership, as much as they do the project. Are the relationships working as planned? Are staff members of both agencies fully involved? Are the policies or procedures of either agency blocking progress? When problems are identified, the manager needs to implement solutions to correct them.

The manager must evaluate the partnership. The evaluation should identify implications for future actions related to partnering. Although a partnership may have achieved the

desired outcome, it cannot be considered a success if any of the partner agencies were negatively impacted by the arrangement. Managers must learn from each collaborative venture they undertake in order to continually improve their ability to work cooperatively.

Termination was an area of weakness for all three sample cases. When a collaborative venture is successful it may be tempting to continue it indefinitely. Further investigation into the implications of on-going collaborative relationships is needed to predict the implications of not having conclusive end dates.

### ***Management Styles and Collaboration:***

Some managers are clearly more suited to working collaboratively than others. However awareness of management style and a conscious effort to manage differently can lead to greater success.

Effective communication is necessary to manage a collaborative venture. Managers should ensure that all of the partners understand their communication; they should avoid acronyms and jargon unless these are well known to all partners. Ideally the manager will be able to communicate a vision that will electrify the partners. The communication needs to be regular, frequent, consistent and clear.

Many managers have difficulty allowing their staff to make decisions. Managers who feel the need to control everything are least likely to make effective collaborators. Micro-management defeats collaboration in a number of ways. It hampers decision making, it disempowers all participants and undermines the ability of all partners to make an appropriate contribution. Managers who have difficulty giving up control, may also struggle to share recognition with their partners; another important attribute of collaborating managers.

Managers must understand that there is a cost as well as a benefit to collaboration. Collaboration takes time and requires each agency to sacrifice autonomy. If a manager is not prepared to give anything up they are unlikely to be successful in collaborating.

### ***Knowing When to Say No!***

Managers need to be prepared to fully commit to a project when forming an alliance. Without this commitment from senior management an agency is unlikely to commit the resources, especially time, that are needed to make the partnership a success.

Being only casually a partner is like being only somewhat pregnant.

-Rosabeth Moss Kanter -

A manager with any of the following issues would be well advised to say no to a potential partnership:

- Mistrust of the other partner
- Too many conflicting priorities
- Feeling protective of one's "turf"
- Feeling rushed, and unable to plan appropriately
- Unable to identify common values of partners
- Lack of common goals

***Conclusion:***

Partnerships can be beneficial and are often imposed by funding agencies, however they are successful much less often than they are attempted. Managers can improve their chances of success by carefully following the framework for entering partnerships. However, certain management styles are particularly counterproductive to partnership arrangement. Managers must be introspective with regards to their own personal attributes and carefully consider the characteristics of partners before committing to working together.

Unsuccessful collaborations can simply be a waste of time, however they can also lead to much more serious challenges including deterioration of relationships, lack of service to clients, turf protection at the expense of mission or loss of agency reputation.

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