

## Defining Collaboration and Explicating the Collaborative Process

Dr. Darrin Hicks  
Darrin.Hicks@du.edu)  
University of Denver

### 1. Defining Collaboration

Collaboration goes beyond communication, cooperation, and coordination. “As its Latin roots –*com* and *laborare*—indicate, it means to work together. It is a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties who work towards common goals by sharing responsibility, authority, and accountability for achieving results. Collaboration is more than simply sharing knowledge and information (communication) and more than a relationship that helps each party achieve its own goals (cooperation and coordination). The purpose of collaboration is to create a shared and joint strategies that go beyond the purview of any particular parties” (Chrislip & Larson, *Collaborative Leadership* (1994), p. 5).

Collaboration has several dimensions, and can be defined in relation to each of them: as an **event**, as a **process**, as a **structure**, and as a form of **governance**

- It is an **event**, which transpires when two or more agents work together to create something new.
- It is a **process** of bringing together diverse agents with different interests, backgrounds, and types of expertise together and guide the work of invention and creation. The collaboration literature often frames this as a problem-solving process—for inventing new ways of understanding the root causes of social problems and to design novel solutions to address those problems.
- Collaboration **structures** are partnerships formed to design, disseminate, implement, and deliver programs and services.
- Collaborative **governance** is “a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets” (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 544)

### 2. Three Essential Elements

There are three elements of that definition that we think are crucial to understanding the nature of collaboration and how it can be measured in terms of influencing program outcomes.

- A. Collaboration, in essence, is a **communicative process**. Hence the types and quality of that communicative process need to be identified and measured.
- B. Collaboration is a **relationship**. What we call collaborative structures are really relationships that have been institutionalized. We should not forget that relationships are dynamic, living entities.
- C. Collaborative relationships are built on **commitment**. It takes a great deal of commitment to collaborate, but if it is done right collaboration also generates mutual commitment.

### 3. The Central Question (framed in terms of public health)

Carl Larson and I have spent the last 10 years working to understand **how the quality of the collaborative process impacts the outcomes of collaborative partnerships**. We measure this impact in terms of how well the programs implemented by collaboratives perform. Specifically, we have been trying to understand what accounts for the varying levels of success collaboratives have in improving the health and well-being of the people they serve. In that work we have found that **the key ingredient of collaborative success is commitment**: A commitment is, in essence, an investment—a pledge made in the present that constrains future action in anticipation of some positive result. Commitments come in many shapes and sizes, such as a commitment to exercise in anticipation of losing weight; the commitment to help a friend in anticipation of the rewards of good friendship; the commitment made to a lover in anticipation of receiving love in return; or the commitment made to invest in the lives of kids in anticipation of improving the chances that those children and their families will thrive. *Commitments begin as a promise to give our valuable resources (time, money, effort, attention, or care) to enhance our own or another's well being. Commitments result in a bond, a relationship forged by fulfilling that promise.* We commit to collaborative efforts by, first, pledging our resources to the group's effort and, second, by forging a bond with others in the group, revising our identity, and by extension our desires, in light of this relationship. **The success of a collaborative seems to rise and fall with the level of commitment the stakeholders who are part of it bring to the table as well as the new forms of commitment the collaborative is able to generate.**

To illustrate, consider the forms that commitment takes in a collaborative initiative:

1. The commitment that stakeholders have to directing their effort towards addressing serious problems that require joint effort to solve.
2. The commitment that stakeholders have to establishing a high-quality collaborative process and working within it.
3. The commitment that stakeholders have to working with each other, expressed in terms of the forms of trust and respect each stakeholder has for the others at the table.
4. The commitment that stakeholders have to the new group identity that is formed in collaboration and to prioritizing this superordinate identity and its interests when it comes to addressing the problem.
5. The resource commitments that each stakeholder must make for the group to succeed.
6. The commitment to selecting an implementing agency that has the requisite resources to deliver the program along with the cooperation of other agencies necessary to ensure that delivery is done efficiently and effectively.
7. The commitment that agency directors have to creating an open and supportive communication climate, and team supervisors to using that climate to establish collaborative working relationships.
8. The commitment of the front-line providers delivering the program to those they serve.

**The consistent finding of our research is that these commitments are cascading, with each prior commitment profoundly influencing the next.** That is, the success and sustainability of a collaborative initiative, to a large extent, rises and falls with the level of commitment the stakeholders who initiate the collaborative effort bring to the table and the ability of that initial commitment to generate additional commitments from those who oversee and implement public and community health programs. The initial commitment to address the problem by using a high-quality collaborative process sets the stage for all of the other forms of commitment, even the level of commitment that a caregiver who was never present for those initial meetings has to those she/he serves. One useful way to conceptualize how these levels of commitment are related is to consider 1–4 as process commitments and 5–6 as implementation commitments and 6–8 as program commitments. **Process commitments can drive implementation commitments, which, in turn, can drive program commitments.**

#### 4. External and Internal models:

Collaboration can be understood from the outside or the inside. That is, we can look at what external forces and conditions affect the quality of collaboration, or we can look at the internal dynamics of the collaborative process, to understand what drives and sustains collaboration. If we look at the external factors, we are creating an exogenous account. If we focus on the internal dynamics, we are creating an endogenous account. **Exogenous** accounts describe the effects of external forces on the process, explain how particular consequences result from outside pressures, whether intentionally applied or not. By contrast, **endogenous** accounts describe the internal dynamics of a process; they attempt to explain how a particular consequence can be seen as the result of particular actions intentionally taken by agents operating within the process.

Ansell & Gash's review stresses both external and internal factors. The **external** factors they describe include: the prior history of working relationships, the incentives stakeholders have to participate, power and resource imbalances, leadership, and institutional design. The **internal** factors they describe include: face-to-face dialogue, trust-building, the development of shared understanding, and the formation of commitment. These lists are useful, but they do not yet cohere into either an exogenous or endogenous model. Because they do not explain how these factors come into being or how their force is sustained (for good or bad). For instance, how does commitment form in and through the collaborative process and how is that commitment sustained, and how is it directed towards accomplishing shared goals. We need an endogenous model to explain this. Armed with the knowledge of how the affective energy generated via collaboration forges group solidarity, how group members make commitments, and how long-term cycles of commitment can be induced, we can purposefully design and facilitate collaborative processes that increase the probability that high-levels of commitment will be generated, sustained, and transferred downstream to the next generation of collaborators. This is the power of an *endogenous model*. Just as Piaget's endogenous account of cognition fostered radical innovations in curriculum design and teaching, or James Heckman's endogenous account of economic growth has spurred massive investments into human capital and early childhood education, an endogenous model of collaboration motivates new insights and innovations in process design and group facilitation.

## 5. How does Collaboration Work: The Affect Model

My theoretical approach begins by reflecting on just how does collaboration work, what is it that makes collaboration a successful strategy. The answer, I believe, can be captured in an **affect model of collaboration**. The affect model of collaboration posits a simple but powerful explanation for how collaboration works: As a means of designing, adopting, and implementing programs capable of improving the health and well-being of a community, **collaboration works when a group of motivated individuals come together to commit themselves and all of their collective energy to accomplishing a clear and elevating goal. There is considerable evidence showing that the success of a collaborative effort hinges on the group's ability to stay focused, directing all of their energy towards activities that further their goal.** If the group remains focused, consistently driving their energy towards achieving the goal, they will likely succeed. If they lose focus, allowing their energy to become detoured by self-interest and struggles for control, they will most likely fail. Affective energy is what motivates us to collaborate with others. It is the glue that binds our collaborative relationships, facilitating a group's transition from a collection of individuals who share professional interests into a collaborative that feels and acts together. **And it is our reading of the force and flow of affective energy that most profoundly influences our decision to commit, or not, our time, effort and resources towards furthering the goals of the collaborative.** But the model remains incomplete. We need to take ask one more question: What keeps a group's energy focused on the goal, preventing it from being diverted and drained away?

## 6. The Importance of Process

The answer is the collaborative process. **A process organizes the work of a collaborative from start to finish.** It is the process that determines who gets invited to the table. It is the process that guides the group in its initial work of setting goals. It is the process that establishes how proposals are generated and discussed and how decisions about them are made. It is through the process that responsibilities are assigned and resources are allocated, and the process that establishes how conflicts over these allocations are handled. It is the process that guides the strategic planning needed to move from decision to implementation. And it is through the process that the collaborative examines and, if necessary, revises its mission and practices; that is, it is the process that guides the work of making revisions to the process itself. While collaboration promises significant benefits, it also comes with substantial risks. These risks include the possibility of rejection, exploitation, disappointment, and co-option. Stakeholders must carefully assess these risks before accepting an invitation to collaborate. **Stakeholders must, first, assess the risk of being exploited or rejected by others in the group.** Collaboration inherently demands that stakeholders cede some their freedom to the authority of the group. Stakeholders will be expected to define their identity, at least in part, in terms of their membership in the collaborative, which inevitably means that they will have to restrain from acting purely out of self-interest. Because ceding authority to the group and its members provides an opportunity for rejection (the group decides that the stakeholder's resources do not merit full inclusion) or exploitation (the stakeholder commits, but is excluded from the payoffs of the collaboration), stakeholders may feel trepidation about committing to the collaborative. While there may be significant advantages of collaboration, **a judgment that there is a relatively high likelihood of either exploitation or rejection will lead people to pursue lower risk, lower reward, self-oriented goals.** Stakeholders also must assess the risks that the collaborative effort will fail to make a discernable difference. The commitment to use a collaborative process requires stakeholders to accept the results of the process, even if that result disappoints. If stakeholders feel that it is likely that collaborative effort will fail, with energy being drained by political infighting or action deferred by a needlessly drawn out process, they may choose to act alone, hoping that their individual effort will make at least some headway in addressing the problem. And stakeholders, finally, must assess the risks associated with losing political independence. Once committed to using a collaborative process, stakeholders can no longer stand outside of the process and criticize those in positions of power for failing to understand and respond to the problem as they would. Rather they must take ownership of the process and defend the decisions reached by the collaborative as their own, even if those decisions are much less radical than those that would reflect the full force of their convictions. Each of these judgments turns on the contingencies of time and trust: Because collaboration demands an upfront commitment to using a process, before its outcomes are known, **the decision to collaborate must be underwritten by considerable trust.** Accepting an invitation to collaborate is predicated on the judgment that the members of the group are trustworthy. But, given that stakeholders are often asked to collaborate with relative strangers, especially in state and countywide initiatives, on what basis can they make this judgment?

## 7. Evaluating Process Quality

The most common cognitive device people use to determine the risks inherent in collaborative activity is their impressions of the fairness of the process, because it is among the first available, easiest to ascertain, and most reliable indicators of one's security in a social situation. **Process Quality judgments thereby "serve as a proxy for interpersonal trust in guiding decisions about whether to behave in a cooperative fashion"** (Lind, 2001, p. 56).

People continually read processes for relational cues they can use to ascertain their status within a group. When people perceive that they are being treated fairly they will, in turn, feel valued, respected, and cared for by the group. The result is that they will come to see their individual identity in terms of their group membership, an identification which in turn results in an increased commitment to the groups' projects and goals. Thirty years of research in procedural justice has demonstrated that the perception of procedural fairness serves as the core motivation for cooperation and group engagement (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Lind, 2001; Tyler & Bladder, 2000; Tyler & Lind, 2000; Tyler, 2011). Conversely, the perception of unfairness is the primary motivation for antisocial, combative resistance. Applying this insight to collaboration, we can say that if stakeholders perceive the process as unfair, they may be more likely to abandon collaboratives; or worse, they may remain and find ways to manipulate the process to garner more resources for themselves at the expense of others. They will not, however, see their actions as unethical but as the natural outcome of the process itself. The result is a vicious circle of selfishness and the eventual collapse of the collaborative process. On the other hand, **when stakeholders perceive the process as fair they will act cooperatively even when they receive less than what they hoped for.** And they will take others' needs and desires into consideration in forming their own convictions. The result is a virtuous circle whereby the initial energy invested into the collaborative fosters greater commitment to the process and stakeholders continue to rededicate themselves and their resources to sustaining joint initiatives.

We have developed two instruments that measure the quality of collaborative processes, the *Working Together* measure and the *Process Quality Scale*. We have identified what we think are the most important features of high-quality collaborative process.

- **It is inclusive:** Ideally, everyone affected by a problem is invited to participate in reflecting on its nature and designing plans to address it. An inclusive process moves beyond proportional representation, towards reflecting the perspectives, experiences, and concerns of the broader community. Inclusion is a means for ensuring the presence of "unusual voices"—offering minority or different perspectives—in the process as well as those with command of resources. A diversity of views may help compensate for a non-diverse group of stakeholders, because stakeholders may perceive the presence of "unusual voices" as a sign of genuine inclusiveness.
- **It treats all stakeholders equally:** All stakeholders have an equal opportunity to influence the final decision. This opportunity is often experienced by individual stakeholders, ironically, as the feeling that they have a disproportionate chance to affect the final decision, i.e., that what they say could command the attention and win the assent of the entire group. But an equitable process is free of favoritism. Each group member needs to justify her or his position; nothing is taken for granted.
- **It is authentic:** Each participant believes that there is a good chance that what the group decides will actually be implemented. Stakeholders must believe that there are not powerful forces pulling the strings. They must believe that decisions have not been made in advance, or that their decisions will be treated as nothing more than a recommendation.
- **It is transparent:** All decisions are made publicly. All stakeholders understand the stages of the decision-making process. The criteria for making decisions are clear, and how those criteria have been applied is made explicit when publicizing any decision. Stakeholders know how the information used to inform decision-making has been collected, and they have the means to judge its credibility. All stakeholders understand how leadership positions are filled and have an opportunity to occupy them.
- **It focuses on the problem:** Stakeholders trust each other enough to focus on the problem they collectively face, rather than trying to garner resources for their home organizations. The process must consider the real needs of the entire community, how each stakeholder contributes to the problem, and how each might contribute to its solution. The most important criterion for determining the merits of a proposal should be its focus on the problem.
- **It is revisable:** The process is open to revision if it is seen unfair. There are sufficient opportunities to challenge decisions. And stakeholders feel they can contest decisions without fear of retribution.

Each of these dimensions can be further specified and measured much more precisely. To illustrate let's take a closer look at the dimensions of authenticity.

- All stakeholders, regardless of the organization they represent, are presumed to be able to ask critical questions, present compelling evidence, to tag problematic behaviors and attitudes, make a case for revising the process when it goes off-track, and to present solutions that are to be taken seriously. Thus, in the process, some people's merits are not taken for granted while other people are asked to justify themselves

- The processes stays focused on the problem being addressed and, importantly, all stakeholders discuss the criteria for making decisions and the possible costs and benefits of a decision in terms of how it furthers the collaborative's goals rather than how it advantages or disadvantages their back-home organizations.
- Those with the power to make decisions and resource commitments are at the table. Or at the very least they have sent representatives who have the power to make commitments on their organizations behalf.
- Those in high-level positions trust the group to do its job and, therefore, do not try to pull strings so as to influence the group or simply cherry-pick which of the solutions offered by the group they will support.
- The group feels that it has the power to make binding decisions. So the decision has not been made in advance and is simply confirmed by the process.

#### 8. The Influence on Program Outcomes: the NFP & IY

We have found that **high-quality collaborative processes are instrumental in keeping stakeholders engaged, fostering strong inter-agency partnerships, enrolling and retaining clients in programs, increasing the level of community and parental involvement, ensuring that caregivers build strong relationships with those they serve, and to implementing programs with fidelity.**

- In our study of the Colorado Community Health initiative we found that process quality was the **best predictor of success and sustainability** over a ten-year period.
- In our studies of the Nurse-Family Partnership we found that process quality **better explained the variance in client and nurse retention than any other known variable.**
- In our study of the Incredible Years program we found that process quality was **associated with the levels of parent and teacher involvement, program fidelity and social-emotional competence.**

#### 9. The Transfer of Commitment

The most intriguing aspect of these findings is that the quality of the process was measured anywhere from 3-5 years before analyzing its relationship to program outcomes. Of course, it is reasonable to ask how the quality of the collaborative process could exercise that sort of influence on program outcomes. Our answer is that the commitment generated by an open and credible process transferred from the initial stakeholder group through the organizational cultures of the agencies responsible for implementing the program and then on to the teams of service providers in that agency and finally to those served by them. We call this the **transfer of commitment.** We posit two explanations of the transfer of commitment that we believe are applicable to your work in early childhood care and education.

- **A developmental explanation:** We have focused our efforts on understanding and measuring the quality of the collaborative process in the beginning stages of program implementation. **Just as the first years of a child's life are crucial to its later development, the same is true for collaboratives.**
- **A relational explanation:** The programs we have examined share an important characteristic: their **success depends on the quality of the relationship between provider and client, nurse and mother, teacher and parent, teacher and student.** Collaborative relationships travel all the way through to these critical relationships.