

A Framework for Success: Maximizing Collaborations between Federal Organizations

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In an era of declining budgets and growing demands, the Obama White House and the Executive Department Secretaries have committed themselves to increasing the openness and transparency of government as a means to best employ available resources. The Administration identified collaboration among government entities as one of three key pillars to achieving this goal.¹ The government contains multiple stakeholder organizations, each with its own mission, customers, and challenges. But these missions, customers, and challenges are not exclusive to any one organization; rather, they are shared across performers with specialized knowledge, skills, and tools that could be leveraged to support similar work across the same and different mission spaces. Through sharing information, experiences, responsibilities, and costs among organizations pursuing similar goals through collaboration, government has the opportunity to maximize openness and resource use.

This article presents a notional framework for implementation of the various phases of the collaboration activity, from evaluating opportunities to collaborate, through termination of a collaborative enterprise. This framework is based largely on three recent U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports on interagency collaboration: “Results-Oriented Government: Practices That Can Help Enhance and Sustain Collaboration among Federal

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Agencies,” October 21, 2005; “Managing for Results: Key Considerations for Implementing Interagency Collaborative Mechanisms,” September 27, 2012; and “Managing for Results: Implementation Approaches Used to Enhance Collaboration in Interagency Groups,” February 14, 2014. Taken together, these three documents provide a set of recommendations for government agencies seeking to conduct shared activities. In order to expand on the findings in these reports and to flesh out the framework, this article also draws upon additional academic literature on the subject.

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Definition of Terms

Two terms used throughout this article are collaboration and stakeholder. GAO defines collaboration as “any joint activity that is intended to produce more public value than could be produced when the agencies act alone.”² We draw upon the academic literature to derive the following definition for a stakeholder: “Any person, group or organization with an interest in, who affects, or is affected by an issue area or problem.”³ In other words, stakeholders are “those people who are responsible for problems or issues, whose perspectives or knowledge are needed to develop good solutions or strategies, and those who have the power and resources to block or implement solutions and strategies.”⁴

GAO Best Practices for Collaboration

The 2005 GAO report focused on describing eight best practices designed to produce successful collaboration:⁵

- Define and articulate a common outcome.

Agencies desiring to collaborate should develop “a clear and compelling rationale to work together,” one consistent with each agency’s goals and missions and backed with “sustained resources and commitment.”⁶

- Establish mutually reinforcing or joint strategies. Successful collaboration requires that organizations establish joint strategies to “work in concert with those of their partners” and help align the agencies’ “activities, core processes, and resources to accomplish the common outcome.”⁷
- Identify and address needs by leveraging resources. An assessment of each participating agency’s strengths and limitations can identify opportunities to leverage resources, (“human, information technology, physical, and financial”) in order to gain benefits otherwise not available to the organizations working alone.⁸
- Agree on roles and responsibilities. Successful collaboration requires the participating agencies to “define and agree on their respective roles and responsibilities, including how the collaborative effort will be led” in order to “clarify who will do what, organize their joint and individual efforts, and facilitate decision-making.”⁹
- Establish compatible policies, procedures, and other means to operate across agency boundaries. Collaborating organizations need to “address the compatibility of standards, policies, procedures, and data systems that will be used in the collaborative effort,” as well as overcome differences in cultures across agencies through the development of mutual trust and frequent communications.¹⁰
- Develop mechanisms to monitor, evaluate, and report results. Collaborating

organizations “need to create the means to monitor and evaluate their efforts to enable them to identify areas for improvement” and to provide feedback through adequate reporting mechanisms to decision makers, clients, and stakeholders.¹¹

- Reinforce agency accountability for collaborative efforts through agency plans and reports. Agencies participating in collaborative efforts should “use their strategic and annual performance plans as tools to drive collaboration with” their partner agencies and “establish complementary goals and strategies for achieving results.”¹²
- Reinforce individual accountability for collaborative efforts through performance management systems. Organizations participating in a collaboration should “use their performance management systems (e.g., performance-based pay systems for senior executives designed around “partnership-oriented goals”) to strengthen accountability for results, specifically by placing greater emphasis on fostering the necessary collaboration both within and across organizational boundaries to achieve results.”¹³
- The 2012 GAO report described the following seven features, or characteristics, of successful interagency collaborations:
 - Outcomes and accountability (organizational and individual). A collaboration should have a clearly defined set of common short and long-term goals and outcomes, a mechanism for tracking and monitoring organizational progress toward those outcomes, and a means available for incentivizing participation from personnel in each agency.
 - Bridging organizational cultures. A

variety of means are available to facilitate operating across agency boundaries, e.g., the establishment of common terminology, compatible policies and procedures, cross-agency lines of communication, and formal/informal networks; the conduct of relationship-building activities, planning activities, and joint exercises; and, most importantly, the achievement of mutual trust across agencies.

- Leadership (models, top-level commitment, continuity in leadership). While a variety of leadership models are available (e.g., establishing a lead agency or sharing leadership among multiple agencies), a collaboration should establish measures to ensure continuity of leadership—preferably with direct connections to the high-level officials—over the course of its existence.
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities. A collaboration activity should have a clearly- articulated and codified approach for decision making, as well as a clear delineation of who does what and how joint and individual efforts are organized.
- Participants. Participants should be individuals with the appropriate skills and abilities who are able to participate on a regular basis and are knowledgeable of their organization’s resources, as well as those individuals with the requisite authority to commit resources, make decisions, and resolve policy and programmatic challenges that arise during collaboration.¹⁵
- Resources (funding, staffing, technology). A successful collaboration requires the availability of a standardized method for tracking the expenditure of funds, a mechanism to ensure the staffing of collaborative activities from each agency (including individual and group incentives to encourage participation), and technology-

GAO Recommended Practices	Outcomes and Accountability	Bridging Organizational Cultures	Leadership	Clarity of Roles and Responsibilities	Participants	Resources	Written Guidance and Agreements
1) Define and articulate a common outcome	X			X			X
2) Establish mutually reinforcing or joint strategies				X			X
3) Identify and address needs by leveraging resources						X	X
4) Agree on roles and responsibilities			X	X			X
5) Establish compatible policies, procedures, to operate across agency boundaries		X				X	X
6) Develop mechanisms to monitor, evaluate, and report results	X						X
7) Reinforce agency accountability for collaborative efforts through agency plans and reports	X						X
8) Reinforce individual accountability for collaborative efforts through performance management	X						X

Table 1. GAO Cross Walk: 2005 Recommended Practices with 2012 Key Categories

based tools designed to facilitate joint interaction.

- Written guidance and agreements. Having agencies articulate “a common outcome and roles and responsibilities into a written document” is a powerful tool for collaboration as are lower-level interagency agreements (spelling out the details of specific collaborative projects).¹⁶

The 2012 GAO report built and expanded upon the agency’s 2005 report, and the best practices identified in the latter can be mapped onto the features found in the former. Table 1 outlines the GAO’s crosswalk of its eight identified best practices from the 2005 report to the seven key feature categories outlined in their 2012 report.

The 2014 GAO report focused on three

of the features identified in the 2012 report: outcomes and accountability, leadership, and resources. Working with expert practitioners, the authors of this report investigated methods that interagency groups implemented to facilitate collaboration. For example, among the ways that organizations attempted to establish common outcomes and objectives were the following: the holding of “early in-person meetings to build relationships and trust,” the identification of “early wins for the group to accomplish,” and the development of “outcomes that represented the collective interests of participants.”¹⁷ To help promote accountability, the organizations undertook activities such as developing performance measures tied to shared outcomes and the development of “open and transparent” progress reporting methods.¹⁸ A complete list of these methods is shown in Table 2.¹⁹

	Key Features	Implementation Approaches from Selected Interagency Groups
1a	Outcome: Clearly defining short- term and long-term outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Started group with most directly affected participants and gradually broadened to others. Conducted early outreach to participants to identify shared interests. Held early in-person meetings to build relationships and trust Identified early wins for the group to accomplish. Developed outcomes that represented the collective interests of participants. Developed a plan to communicate outcomes and track progress. Revisited outcomes and refreshed interagency group.
1b	Accountability: Establishing a means to track and monitor progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed performance measures and tied them to shared outcomes. Identified and shared relevant agency performance data. Developed methods to report on the group's progress that are open and transparent. Incorporated interagency group activities into individual performance expectations.
3	Leadership: Identifying lead agency or individual and clearly identifying/ agreeing upon roles and responsibilities if shared leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designated group leaders exhibited collaboration competencies. Ensured participation from high-level leaders in regular, in- person group meetings and activities. Rotated key task and responsibilities when leadership of the group was shared. Established clear and inclusive procedures for leading the group during initial meetings. Distributed leadership responsibilities for group activities among participants.
6	Resources: Determining how collaboration to be funded and staffed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Created an inventory of resources dedicated towards interagency outcomes. Leveraged related agency resources toward the group's outcomes. Pilot tested new collaborative ideas, programs, or policies before investing resources.

Table 2. GAO 2014 Findings of Approaches Chosen by Interagency Groups to Implement Particular 2012 Key Features

Additional Key Features from the Literature

The findings from the three GAO reports summarized above provide a good starting point to inform government collaboration efforts; a review of the academic literature suggests additional features to facilitate such efforts. Organizations can use these elements to inform and evaluate whether the necessary conditions for collaboration success are present and identify areas for improvement. We expand the discussion along the four dimensions of collaborative leadership, motivation to collaborate, ability to collaborate, and trust and familiarity required to collaborate.

Collaborative Leadership

Leadership has been characterized in the literature as essential to the creation and maintenance of collaborative efforts.²⁰ While the GAOs been characterized in the literature as key feature, it does not detail the underlying conditions for collaborative

leadership success. The academic literature, for example, emphasizes that a non-hierarchical leadership structure is necessary for successful collaboration. According to Barbara Crosby and John Bryson, collaboration occurs in the realm of shared power, where different stakeholders control distinct resources and have their own bases of power and authority.²¹ Given this shared-power context and the fact that collaboration is typically voluntary, collaborative leadership tends to be facilitative, with leaders actively encouraging and engaging participants to work together rather than merely issuing orders.²² David Chrislip emphasizes the importance of strong facilitative leaders to “energize and sustain” the collaboration process.²³

Similarly, other authors have described collaborative leadership as “catalytic leadership where it is more about enabling or facilitating collaboration, or leading from the middle rather than leading from the top.”²⁴ In contrast to hierarchical arrangements, Jeffrey Luke notes “catalytic leadership stimulates action

among people over whom one has little or no authority.... Catalytic leaders are collaborative and strategic, but do not dominate.”²⁵

Like the GAO reports, the academic literature suggests that leaders of successful collaborative efforts work with stakeholders to develop a common vision that keeps the common goal(s) in the forefront, while ensuring that the vision is adjusted as necessary when the conditions and context changes. Agreeing on a common vision, though difficult at times, is key to a successful outcome, and achieving this condition will be a recurring theme throughout this discussion. Ricardo Morse addresses this idea of the importance of a common vision in his concept of “integrative leadership,” describing it as a key catalyst for collaborations to produce public value. He argues that “it may be that successful partnerships occur when it is the common purpose that becomes the leader, with individuals exercising leadership in a way that develops and sustains the common purpose.”²⁶

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Morse also describes “two primary defining features” of integrative leaders as “entrepreneurialism and their ability to cultivate trusting relationships.”²⁷ In contrast to business entrepreneurs, Morse refers to integrative leaders as “public entrepreneurs” who “define success in terms of public value created.”²⁸ The literature suggests that this sort of leadership is essential to foster a sense of trust and legitimacy in the collaborative process among the participating stakeholders, so long as this common purpose continues to resonate with their organizational interests.²⁹ An important piece of collaboration

planning that fosters trust among participants is the clear articulation of common goals as well as the individual organizational stakeholder interests. Trust building is discussed in more detail below.

Public administration literature and practice suggest that successful collaborations have committed sponsors and effective champions at many levels providing both formal and informal leadership.³⁰ Sponsors have “formal authority [including resources and legitimacy] that can be used to legitimize and underwrite participation efforts,” while champions “have positions with considerable responsibility for managing the day-to-day work of the participation effort,”³¹ as well as “a high level of personal commitment to the process.”³² Crosby and Bryson note that:

Sponsors typically do not have to commit a lot of their time to the effort, but they can be counted on to come through when needed, especially at a high-visibility juncture.... Champions can be policy entrepreneurs themselves, or ‘process’ champions who do not have any preconceived notion about a desirable solution.³³

The 2012 GAO report discussed the importance of bridging across different organizational cultures; the academic literature suggests that boundary-spanning leaders—individuals with the experience in interorganizational management³⁴—are vital to achieving this goal. They have been defined as individuals who can “link two or more systems whose goals and expectations are likely to be at least partially conflicting.”³⁵ Boundary-spanning leaders have broad credibility in areas linked to the problem and therefore “can play a significant role in negotiating and effecting collaborative relations between organizations.”³⁶ Like all successful collaborative leaders, they are “individuals who help bridge the gap between organizations by finding and articulating common ground” during all phases

of collaboration.³⁷

The 2014 GAO report indicated that successful interagency groups implemented many, if not all, of these collaborative leadership characteristics.³⁸

Motivation to Collaborate

Collaboration, in many ways, is voluntary and requires motivation on the part of the participants to occur. Therefore, it is important to understand what motivates leaders and organizations to form collaborative alliances.³⁹ While the motivation of the partners does not need to be the same, all of the stakeholders need to be invested, have an understanding of the value of the collaboration, and recognize the value of the other partners to them and their shared goals.⁴⁰

Motivation to collaborate can take many forms, including incentives, interdependencies, common objectives, formal or political structures, and mutual self-interest. The 2012 GAO findings, for example, stress the importance of organizational incentive structures for collaboration. Mike Bresnen and Nick Marshall found that motivation results from a mix of intrinsic and extrinsic incentives and vary for each participant.⁴¹ Lowell Bryan and Claudia Joyce suggest the “use of mutual self-interest rather than authority to motivate collaboration.”⁴²

Morton Hansen’s research describes additional measures to enhance motivation for collaboration. He points out that in contrast to organizations with a culture of openness to outside ideas and a willingness to help others, groups exhibiting “not-invented here” or information hoarding behaviors present barriers to collaboration that increase collaboration costs.⁴³ To break down these barriers, Hansen argues for leaders to promote unifying common goals and the value of cross-community teamwork, encourage collaboration, and send signals to get people to think beyond narrow interests.⁴⁴ James Austin argues that frequent

communication about these common goals and both the shared and individual benefits of teamwork can motivate organizations.⁴⁵

And, as Austin indicates, motivation must exist for the individuals as well as the organizations. Researchers recommend recognizing, assessing, and rewarding collaboration in organizational metrics, individual performance evaluations, 360-degree reviews with peer inputs, and promotion structures.⁴⁶

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Ability to Collaborate

Stakeholders motivated to collaborate need pathways to provide the ability to do so. The 2014 GAO report examines the establishment of these pathways, including methods for tracking and monitoring progress, as well as mechanisms for funding and staffing. It finds that creating clear processes is vital to ensuring that organizations have the ability to collaborate.

A number of case studies in the academic literature describe various phases governing the collaboration process: problem-setting, direction-setting, and structuring. Barbara Gray suggests these three phases correspond to the following activities: identification of the stakeholders and common challenges, articulation of organizational values and common purpose, and the creation of the structures to “support and sustain their collective appreciation and problem-solving activities.”⁴⁷ Whether established through formal processes or informal “personal relationships, psychological contracts, and informal understandings and

commitments,”⁴⁸ completing each of these phases and conducting the conversations and planning is fundamental to ensuring the success of the partnership.

Despite the central role of trust in successful collaborations, the starting point often is one more of suspicion than trust...

Hansen’s research indicates that networks can facilitate the bridging of different organizational cultures, further enhancing these organizations’ abilities to collaborate. He argues that networks can enable stakeholders to find the information and expertise they are looking for and facilitate knowledge transfer.⁴⁹ Moreover, linkages to networks can help stakeholders identify potential informal and formal collaboration partners. Alternatively, when these networks are not present, multiple barriers to collaboration arise.⁵⁰ Hansen suggests that leadership should foster development of “nimble interpersonal networks” across the interagency community. According to Hansen, the literature (drawing on theory and practice) provides the following set of rules (note the two phases) for network building in order to capture their greatest collaborative value:

While seeking collaboration opportunities:

- Build outward, not inward.
- Build diversity, not size.
- Build bridges, don’t use familiar faces.
- Build weak ties, not strong.

When an opportunity is identified:

- Swarm target, don’t go it alone.
- Switch to strong ties, don’t rely on weak.⁵¹

Trust and Legitimacy Required to Collaborate

All three GAO reports explicitly mention trust as one of the factors necessary to sustain collaborative relationships and, further, as a factor influenced by the implementation of the features and best practices outlined in the reports. Likewise, the academic literature speaks to the importance of legitimacy and trust and explores what methods collaborative leaders should employ to build trust.

Stephen Goldsmith and William Eggers call trust “the bedrock of collaboration” suggesting “without it people won’t collaborate or share knowledge.”⁵² The Wilder Institute’s Collaboration Factors Inventory lists “mutual respect, understanding and trust” as key membership-related factors for success.⁵³ Trust and legitimacy are two of the top issues Barbara Gray suggests should be addressed during the early phases of a collaboration, specifically, “commitment to collaborate, growing from the interests of the stakeholders and the building and maintenance of trust among both present and potential participants” and “acceptance of the legitimacy of other stakeholders.”⁵⁴ Peter Ring and Andrew Van De Ven also emphasize the importance of trust, noting “the greater the ability to rely on trust, the lower the transaction costs (time and effort) required of parties to negotiate, reach agreements, and execute a cooperative IOR [interorganizational relationship].”⁵⁵ Crosby and Bryson note that trust building is “one of the most important ingredients of a productive team,” and trust is “the foundation of team spirit, which is a shared enthusiasm for the group’s mission and a belief that the team can accomplish great things together.”⁵⁶

Despite the central role of trust in successful collaborations, the starting point often is one more of suspicion than trust between partners.⁵⁷ And, several issues challenge a leader’s ability to build and sustain trust, including interpersonal

dynamics; complexity and multiplicity of goals, risks, and perceived benefits and consequences; the complexity of the collaboration itself; changing participants and evolving needs; power imbalances; and issues mentioned earlier, such as competing organizational cultures and missions.⁵⁸ Chris Huxham and Siv Vangen state that, “if not managed effectively, any one of these issues can prevent trust from developing or even cause loss of trust,” thus the importance of dynamic management of these issues to prevent “the trust loop” from fracturing at any point throughout the collaborative process.⁵⁹

Huxham and Vangen argue that success in managing trust in collaborations “implies both the ability to cope in situations where trust is lacking and the ability to build trust in situations where this is possible.”⁶⁰ They suggest that one method for managing trust is the adoption of a “small-wins approach,” where “trust is built incrementally via successful implementation of modest collaborative initiatives.”⁶¹

Other methods for building trust found in the academic literature include the use of informal exploration sessions, where stakeholders get to know each other, and the creation of powerful, impelling experiences through team-building activities.⁶² An avenue described as especially effective for fostering trust among potential collaboration partners with initially weak ties is through the development of shared experiences, community building, and joint planning activities.⁶³ These trust-building techniques, along with “easy-win” collaborative activities, are said to have immediate and long-term benefits for collaboration.⁶⁴ Finally, learning feedback loops in which participants are constantly evaluating the conditions of the collaboration’s efficiency and equity, as well as the quality of the relationships, have also been credited in facilitating the building and sustainment of trust.⁶⁵ As mentioned earlier, leaders should ensure that these trust-building activities (including those that nurture cross-

sector understanding) are continuous throughout the collaboration project.⁶⁶

Lisa Bingham et al. argue that collaboration leaders succeed when they establish the legitimacy of collaboration as a form of organizing and a source of trusted interaction among members.⁶⁷ In their view, this legitimacy can be established by members of the collaboration reaching a shared understanding of “how they will govern themselves to accomplish the task” to include “identifying ground rules, agreeing upon conflict management processes, and selecting decision norms.”⁶⁸ Another means identified in the literature for maintaining legitimacy among stakeholders is the setting of clear expectations through the consistent application of the collaboration’s approach.⁶⁹ This perceived legitimacy—achieved through recognition, cooperative interactions, and/or benefits by the stakeholders, external actors, or by the members and network—is a necessary/distinct dimension critical for collaborative networks.⁷⁰

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Elaboration on Best Practices and Approaches

In order to provide greater granularity to the collaboration framework, we once again draw on the academic literature as a means to elaborate on certain aspects of the best practices identified in the 2005 GAO report and identify additional implementation approaches beyond those found in the 2014 GAO report.

Ensure Senior Leadership Support and Buy-in

Senior leadership support for collaboration should be explicit and mandated early in the process. This support facilitates many other pieces

of the partnership for both the organizations and the individuals. Chrislip and Larson describe “commitment and/or involvement of high-level, visible leaders” and “support or acquiescence of ‘established’ authorities or powers” as key factors for collaboration success.⁷¹ Involving senior leadership sponsors with the authority to keep the process moving at high levels and/or dedicated leadership champions actively engaged in the process increases the chances for support in terms of resources, time, and visibility. Such senior-level support can also help maintain a healthy sense of urgency among the participants to help move the process forward.

...it is important for collaboration leaders to conduct a stakeholder analysis early in the process and repeat this analysis as necessary...

Incorporate Appropriate Participants

The 2012 GAO report mentions the importance of getting the right participants, with the appropriate skills, availability, and authority involved in the collaboration. The academic literature also emphasizes the criticality of those engaged in or planning to pursue a collaboration taking into account all of the stakeholders important to a collaborative partnership. Determining who should participate can have serious implications for outcomes. Gray emphasizes that participants should include “those whose expertise is essential to constructing a comprehensive picture [of the problem]...those who will be responsible for implementing the solution...those with authority to implement the decision.”⁷² According to her rationale, “having those ‘responsible for’ and ‘with authority to’ implement present during the design phase where the solutions are negotiated increases the likelihood that the agreed solution

will be implemented.”⁷³ Taking her argument into account, it is equally important to identify the not-so-obvious participants, such as those who may be detractors and those indirectly invested in the results.

To ensure that all appropriate participants are involved, it is important for collaboration leaders to conduct a stakeholder analysis early in the process and repeat this analysis as necessary when taking stock during the course of the collaboration. Bryson suggests a basic stakeholder analysis technique for strategic planning requires the team “brainstorm a list of who the organization’s stakeholders are; what their criteria are for judging the performance of the organization (that is, what their ‘stake’ is in the organization or its output); and how well the organization performs against those criteria from the stakeholder’s points of view.”⁷⁴ Bryson notes additional steps for consideration include “understanding how the stakeholders influence the organization, identifying what the organization needs from its various stakeholders, and determining in general how important various stakeholders are.”⁷⁵ According to Bryson, this analysis can “help clarify whether the organization needs to have different missions and perhaps different strategies for different stakeholders, whether it should seek to have its mandates changed, and in general what its strategic issues are.”⁷⁶ Identifying the less obvious stakeholders early, helps organizations understand the challenges the collaboration may face later in the effort.

Utilize a Participatory Planning Process

Participatory planning processes in the early stages of a collaboration activity can greatly assist in establishing shared outcomes and bridging diverse organizational cultures. To facilitate success, the partner organizations should come together at the outset to discuss the goals, relationships and roles, procedures,

plan of actions and milestones, metrics for evaluating progress, and resources required/being contributed by each partner. Gray, for example, discusses “appreciative planning” and “collective strategies” as important collaboration processes, calling them “designs for advancing a shared vision.”⁷⁷ These processes are used when there is recognition of the need for pooling complementary resources from several stakeholders to achieve desired actions.⁷⁸ Appreciative planning involves exploratory joint inquiry by stakeholders into the context of the problem, without the expectation of reaching specific agreements or initiating specific actions.⁷⁹ Collective strategies create specific agreements to address the problem and are often the result of appreciative planning processes.⁸⁰ Participating in common planning activities can help to build trust and understanding among agencies, and such participatory planning is also important to effective stakeholder analysis.⁸¹ And, including as broad a population of participants as possible is important to the creation of a shared understanding of the problem and the solutions, which occurs during the planning process. Not including stakeholders affected by or responsible for implementing the solutions in the planning process could lead to conflict about objectives and potentially block implementation of the plans and solutions developed by the collaboration.

Understand the Organization’s Requirements and Flexibility

Stakeholders should come to the planning meetings prepared to discuss what each organization’s absolute requirements are and what objectives allow for flexibility and negotiation. A key to successful collaboration is the ability to create a “shared vision and joint strategies to address concerns that go beyond the purview of any particular party.”⁸² To do this, participants should understand their organization’s position, as well as possess

the “ability to compromise.”⁸³ Empowering participants can facilitate their flexibility and ability to compromise within the collaboration. One way to do this is the “empowerment of relationship managers,” where they are allowed to vary their own organizations’ procedures to make collaboration-specific decisions.⁸⁴

Participating in common planning activities can help to build trust and understanding among agencies...

Establish a Communication Mechanism

Effective communication is essential to a collaborative effort, including the maintenance of the trust-building loop among stakeholders. Crosby and Bryson emphasize the importance of “fostering communication that aligns and coordinates members’ actions, builds mutual understanding and trust, and fosters creative problem solving and commitment.”⁸⁵ They also emphasize the need to match communication style and content to the group type and needs.⁸⁶ Two related factors from the academic literature for ensuring effective communication are “open and frequent communication” and “established informal and formal communication links.”⁸⁷ Building on this is the need to “create a communication plan” as a way of operationalizing those two factors.⁸⁸ It is important that partners determine how they plan to communicate with one another, selecting communication mechanisms that facilitate effective collaboration and fit the communication styles of their partners. Stakeholders should hold additional meetings, if necessary, to insure all parties involved in the effort clearly understand the way forward. Organizations involved should assess each partner’s communication style when selecting a

primary mode of communication, whether it be email, telephone, or online web repository. In addition, an effective communication mechanism also requires agreement on the frequency of communication—how often can participants expect information from the leadership and how often can they expect to communicate with the group? Finally, a means should be established for ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate in the communications process.

Written partnership agreements help prevent confusion and disagreements and can serve to bolster trust and a sense of legitimacy...

Establish a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA)/Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)/Contract at the Start of the Collaboration and Be Prepared to Review and Modify as Necessary at Later Stages

Building on the 2012 GAO recommendation for written guidance and agreements, as well as recommendations from the academic literature to create joint agreements in order to ensure results,⁸⁹ an MOA, MOU, or contract can assist in formalizing common understandings and agreements and provide a framework for collaboration implementation. While oftentimes difficult to develop and execute, for formal collaborations, a written agreement ensures the arrangement—including objectives, communication mechanism, and other processes and procedures—is clearly documented.⁹⁰ The process of developing such an agreement provides all parties with an opportunity to read and agree to the parameters of the partnership, as well as modify it as necessary. It also serves as a reminder of what was agreed upon and helps to ensure that the responsibilities and resources that are required are available.

Written partnership agreements help prevent confusion and disagreements and can serve to bolster trust and a sense of legitimacy among the participants. It can also allow for a more seamless transition as participants leave and join the collaboration. For example, in one study, participants with formal agreements, who believed these agreements effectively articulated financial responsibilities, decision authority, and risk sharing, reported greater satisfaction with collaboration outcomes.⁹¹

Develop a Plan of Actions and Milestones (POA&M) Agreed to by Participating Organizations

Building on the 2005 GAO report practices to build monitoring mechanisms and establish roles and responsibilities and the 2012 GAO feature of written guidance, the authors also recommend the drafting of a written plan of actions and milestones (POA&M). According to the federal government’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB), a POA&M is a “tool identifying tasks that need to be accomplished. It details resources required to accomplish the elements of the plan, any milestones in meeting the task, and scheduled completion dates for the milestones.”⁹² POA&Ms are an OMB-required reporting tool for federal government agencies to comply with the Federal Information Security Management Act.⁹³ They are commonly utilized in the Department of Defense acquisition community, for example, to facilitate program management and monitoring. This tool can serve formal cross-agency collaborations in a similar manner, including agreed upon milestones and schedules for regular activities.

Identify Decision Points in the Collaboration Process

A mechanism should be developed for identifying mutually-agreed-upon decision points—e.g., when organizations must commit to the collaboration, commit to staying in or leaving

the collaboration, and when the collaboration should end—and criteria established under which these decisions can be made. In particular, the participating agencies should agree upon means for modifying the collaboration arrangement. Likewise, a mechanism should be in place to enable the identification of an agreement on metrics for performance and outcomes.

How to Structure Collaboration Over Time: Proposed Collaboration Framework

Drawing on the GAO findings and insights from the academic literature, we propose a notional collaboration framework to structure collaboration over time. This framework can serve to inform interagency collaborative activities. While designed for the federal level, the principles of this framework (and summary of preconditions for collaboration) are drawn from broad applications of cross-organizational collaboration and can also be implemented for collaborations between the federal, state, and local levels. The framework is not intended to be prescriptive guidance; rather, it is a checklist of activities designed to provide stakeholders with a starting point for considering, planning, executing, and concluding collaborative partnerships. Each project will have its own context that may require a different set of activities be implemented; application of the framework can be tailored, as appropriate, to each scenario.

The notional framework is organized around four phases of activity: 1) evaluating opportunities, 2) planning the collaboration, 3) execution, and 4) termination. While there is little discussion in the literature on termination of collaborative efforts,⁹⁴ Winer and Ray have emphasized the importance of ending the collaboration when its goals are achieved.⁹⁵ Of the four phases, the planning phase is, in many ways, the most critical to the long-term success of a collaborative activity. Failure to

lay the proper groundwork and consider the key issues presented by the GAO and the academic literature in this phase will often lead to failure of the collaborative venture during the execution phase.

The following sections outline a list of activities, questions to consider, and an output/outcome for each phase. Stakeholders should apply the suggested activities under each section in an order appropriate to their collaboration circumstances.

The notional framework is organized around four phases of activity: 1) evaluating opportunities, 2) planning the collaboration, 3) execution, and 4) termination.

Phase One: Evaluating Opportunities and Justifying Collaboration

The key activities of Phase One:

Identify opportunities for and benefits/ costs of collaboration:

- Identify collaboration opportunities:
 - » Use an evaluation method, such as the Prevention Institute’s “collaboration multiplier tool,”⁹⁶ to cross-walk organizational requirements and resources that might be leveraged.
 - » Conduct outreach and conversations or surveys of organizations with similar goals, missions, or pursuits to identify potential opportunities.
 - » Review taskings and mandated activities to identify areas for potential collaboration.
- Estimate the opportunity and collaboration

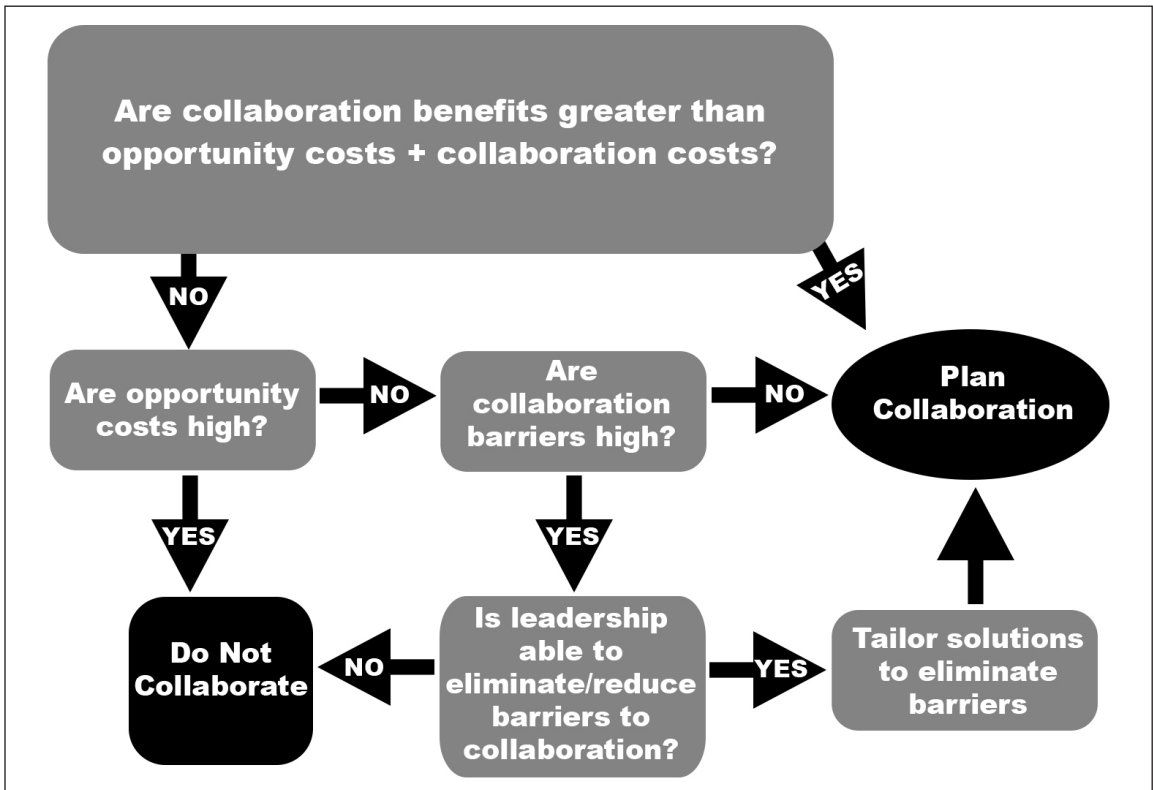


Figure 1. Decision to Collaborate Flow Chart

costs, utilizing a tool such as Morton Hansen’s “collaboration equation”⁹⁷ to determine whether the benefits of collaboration are greater than the sum of the opportunity and collaboration costs (see Figure 1).

- Lower any identified barriers to enable effective collaboration.

Outcomes expected from Phase One:

- Collaboration candidate(s) identified.
- Decision to initiate collaboration planning.

Phase Two: Planning the Collaboration

The key activities of Phase Two:

- Map the environment/context of collaboration:

- » What is the mandate and is it external or internally generated by stakeholder community?

- » What are the authorities and resources supporting/challenging collaboration?

- Map and analyze stakeholders to determine the participants in collaboration in order to ensure the right personnel are participating:

- » Who are the key stakeholders and possible participants?

- » What does each stakeholder/partner want to achieve? What are their interests/concerns?

- » What are the interrelationships with other stakeholders?

- » Are there existing collaborative arrangements?

- » What can each partner/stakeholder/agency contribute to collaboration?
- » What are the benefits and costs to each partner/stakeholder/agency to participating in the collaboration?
- » What are the strengths/weaknesses of the collaborative partners?
- Together with collaborative partners, agree on and distinguish between common/complementary outcomes:
 - » What is the overarching common collaboration goal?
 - » Review the stakeholder interests; which of their organizational goals complement the common collaboration goal?
 - » Clearly articulate the goals and objectives of the collaborative activity
- Agree with partners on metrics and how progress toward the goal will be measured.
- Develop a written strategic plan (together with key stakeholders) including a mission statement (perhaps in the form of an MOU or MOA)
- Agree on required roles and responsibilities to achieve goals:
 - » What are the roles?
 - » Who has responsibility for what (assignments, Office of Primary Responsibility, leads)?
 - » What is the leadership continuity plan, if partners undergo organizational changes and/or lose key personnel for this effort?
- Determine resources required for collaborative project (funding, staffing, and information/technology):
 - » Who has these resources?
 - » Who will commit to sharing/contributing them?
 - » How will their use be tracked?
- Determine the mechanisms for communication and information sharing in support of the collaborative activity (to include any special handling requirements for proprietary, sensitive or classified data).
- Determine the agreed upon management and organizational structures, policies, and procedures required to support collaboration across agency boundaries:
 - » Determine how decisions will be made and/or conflicts adjudicated.
 - » Identify and agree upon project milestone decision points and other key activities, including joint concept development activities, joint studies, and requirements harmonization activities—document in a POA&M.
 - » In order to get senior leadership buy-in, take steps to develop high-level support within each agency for the collaborative activity, starting with the Senior Program Coordinators in each agency—develop formal documentation, as needed.
 - » Coordinate with appropriate umbrella structures and senior steering groups, and establish a working group for the activity when appropriate, again to ensure senior leadership support and buy-in.
- Determine how the arrangement is be documented/codified/formally endorsed by each partner:
 - » What mechanism is most appropriate? MOU, MOA, contract, other?

- Determine how the collaboration arrangement can be modified (organizational commitment changes to roles, resources; mission changes, etc.):
 - » Determine how frequently the arrangement will be reviewed and under what conditions.
 - » Agree on what conditions partners may leave the collaboration and/ or withdraw their resources.
- Brief stakeholder organizational leadership to facilitate buy-in:
 - » Outline individual incentives and career objectives for participation.

Outcomes expected from Phase Two:

- Agreed upon common goal(s) and mission statement.
- Strategic plan.
- Metrics and measures for evaluating progress (evaluation plan).
- Leadership identified.
- Stakeholders identified.
- Roles and responsibilities identified.
- Processes and management structure agreed upon.
- Resources identified and pledged.
- POA&M with milestones and outputs developed.
- Documentation of collaboration agreements (formal or informal) incorporating the elements above, as appropriate.

Phase Three: Execution

The key activities of Phase Three:

- Implementation in support of the common goals.
- Ensure the proper personnel, with appropriate skills, knowledge, and authority are assigned from each agency, and that they are able/willing to commit the necessary time to support the effort.
- Monitor, control, and track use of resources.
- Conduct regular in-process reviews to evaluate progress. The conditions for evaluation of collaboration projects (outcomes and accountability) should be set during the planning stage and be utilized during project implementation to track how the collaborative effort is doing and whether it is achieving its goals. This is also an important piece for closing out specific project collaborations (to determine how well they worked and identify what could be done better in future projects).
- Reinforce organizational and individual accountability for collaborative activities.
- Ensure adequate communications channels and associated technologies are in place to facilitate deepening trust and teamwork across agency boundaries.
- Maintain high-level visibility of and support for the activity in each agency and at higher echelons of government.
- Ensure continued provision of resources to support the collaboration.
- Identify conflict management mechanisms to be employed in cases where issues cannot be resolved at working levels (also part of the planning phase).

- Periodically review the status of the collaborative activity to assess whether it should continue and allow for the withdrawal of partners from the activity.
- Evaluate continuation or termination of collaboration based on agreed criteria such as:
 - » Milestones and goals are being achieved.
 - » Project's common goals are no longer valid.
 - » Collaborative inertia cannot be overcome.
 - » Costs of collaboration exceed benefits.

Outcomes expected from Phase Three:

- Progress reports.
- Achievement of project goals.
- Modification of goals, roles, processes, POA&M, and documentation, as appropriate.
- Decision to continue or terminate collaboration.

Phase Four: Termination

The key activities of Phase Four:

- Reach the conditions and time points at which the activity can be terminated.
- Document outcomes and lessons learned from the project and share them with stakeholders and leadership champions/sponsors; such reports support accountability requirements and also serve to inform support for future collaborations.
- Modify any formal agreements as necessary to reflect the conclusion of the collaborative project.

- Cease formal collaboration.

Outcomes expected from Phase Four:

- Final reporting of outcomes with lessons learned.
- Documentation of agreement termination, as needed.

Conclusion

Given the high-level of interest in collaboration within the federal government and the need to maximize efficiencies and eliminate duplications of effort in times of declining budgets, the external pressures for collaboration will likely increase over time. Thus, it is important for stakeholder community leaders within the government to understand and cultivate the conditions for collaboration success. Work on the elements of leadership, trust, motivation, and the ability to collaborate will facilitate smoother planning processes for new collaboration projects. Implementing methodologies to assist in determining when collaborations should be attempted will help reduce waste in time and funding.

The framework outlined here provides for participation criteria and regular assessment, which aid in monitoring and evaluating the progress of a collaboration project and, importantly, provide structured decision points for determining when to withdraw from or terminate such a project. Such attributes lend more predictability and stability to collaborative endeavors making them more attractive for potential participants. Of the four phases described in the framework, the planning phase is the most important. Due diligence taken at the outset to clearly determine the common goals, requirements, commitments of resources and expectations is key to overall success. Engaging the right participants early on can help define and shape the way ahead and gain necessary stakeholder buy-in for effective collaboration.

The framework can help to identify a set of issues that should be given consideration as early in the planning process as feasible, so that as many potential problem areas are anticipated when their remedy is least expensive and their consequences least damaging.

Areas for further research to foster improved collaboration through implementation of this framework include an examination of: what additional conditions and/or drivers should be in place to cause use of the framework and how organizations might train and educate leaders to motivate their use of, reliance on this framework.

Effective collaboration can yield public value greater than the sum of individual organizational efforts. The collaborative framework presented in this paper, informed by the 2005, 2012, and 2014 GAO report findings and our review of the literature on partnerships and collaboration, is offered as a starting point and guide for stakeholders—at the federal, state, or local levels—in considering, planning, implementing, and evaluating collaborations. **IAJ**

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