

# Is Collaboration The Right Strategy For Your Problem?

By Joan Roberts  
Joan Roberts Consulting  
[www.joanroberts.com](http://www.joanroberts.com)

Did you create or participate in a collaborative type of organization called an alliance, coalition partnership or network? Do you ever wonder if your time is well spent in such a process? Have you explored the question of the likelihood of success?

I use the term *collaboration* to refer to inter-organizational collaboration—a coming together of autonomous organizations—although there may be individual members participating on their own behalf. The terms partnership, coalition, and alliance are often used to describe these joined-up organizations. More time, energy and resources are required to deal with the complexity of building this form of organization than a traditional organization. Because of the extra capacity building and the interpersonal and intercultural issues that arise, I urge members to engage in thoughtful assessment prior to entering into a collaborative.

In one organization with which I worked, the organizational mission statement expounded that the organization worked in partnership with the community. Broad statements urging partnership in every instance need to be deconstructed and organizations need to determine in exactly what kinds of situations it is a benefit to work with other organizations and when it is not.

## **When is a collaborative the preferred organizational strategy?**

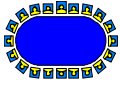
Many funder now require agencies to operate in partnership with other community institutions and agencies. Non-profits, from police departments to hospitals, are involved in inter-organizational processes for prevention purposes. In the business sector, research shows that up to 30% of business is now transacted through an alliance. Partnerships can add value across a business operation's technology transfer, supply chain management, or marketing alliances.

If you are about to organize or join a collaborative consider the following:

- Is the organizing issue compelling enough to maintain interest and commitment?
- Are there clear benefits to undertake collaboration?
- Is there a clear value proposition?
- Is the problem complex and not able to be addressed by a sole organization?

For a collaborative to be successful, the following environmental conditions must be met:

- Conditions are favourable in the external environment.
- Funding is available.



- Convener and convening leadership is seen as legitimate and acceptable.
- Collaboration members have developed collaboration skills and built some inter-organizational trust from previous efforts.

If there is a history of single organizations failing to develop sustainable solutions and partners are willing to collaborate, then you can move forward confidently.

## **The Methodology**

In my consulting practice and workshops I use a development framework based on the work of Thomas Cummings who coined the technical term trans-organizational system for the generic term collaborative.

### **A 6 Step Model to Develop a Trans-organizational System (TS)**

- 1-Problem /Problem set identification
- 2-Motivation to Act
- 3-Member Identification and Selection
- 4-Collaborative Planning
- 5-Building an Organization
- 6-Evaluation

**1. Problem/Problem set identification step addresses the question:  
What intractable problems are surfacing in our environment that we cannot resolve by ourselves?**

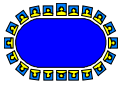
It is important that all members of the collaborative construct the same mental model of the problem set. Each member brings their predetermined analysis and probable solutions to the table. Preferred solutions need to be put aside until the opportunity to explore the problem set is worked through the different perspectives of collaborative members.

**2. Motivation to Act  
We decide to act in concert with others because of the perceived benefits of collaborative action.**

Whoever is the initiator of the process does so because he/she is motivated to act. What are those motivators? What are the motivations of potential members? Self-interest is accepted as the principal motivator.

**3. Member identification and selection  
Who cares about the problem and is willing to join our process?**

The work of an organization is to transform knowledge. The same is true for collaboratives.



Member selection is a process of recruiting knowledge resources into the process. There are three basic ways to do this:

- The expanding network model
- The stakeholder analysis model
- Self-selection model

#### **4. Collaborative planning**

**Should a collaborative be created? If so, what are its vision and action strategies?**

Until members agree to a common vision, collaboratives are rudderless and directionless. The common vision acts like a route outlined on a road map, informing all who participate where the process will try to go. In this visioning and strategic planning phase you develop the following:

- Member commitment
- Sense of mission
- Shared values with which to work together
- Collective vision
- Goals that can be translated into action and be measured.

This is the major trust-building and direction-setting phase in building a collaborative. It is wise to hire a neutral consultant to facilitate this phase.

#### **5. Building an organization**

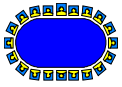
**How do we organize the vision and action into structure, leadership, communication, policies, and procedures?**

Many TSs are stymied by this phase, in which members need to decide how to implement the vision and strategy developed in Phase Four. collaboratives are often built without members ever considering what they need to do to survive as a semi-autonomous organization and carry out the agreed-upon strategy. Instead, members' energy is invested into implementing the strategy until conflict or lack of participation grabs everyone's attention or simply kills off the process. The group's architecture is neglected and the creation of the form (of the group) fails to follow the development of the function (the strategic response to the problem set).

To offset the high failure rate of collaboratives, I have developed a tri-process model of organization effectiveness. The model includes Trust-building processes, Governance processes, and Work Co-ordination processes.

#### **6. Evaluation**

**How is the collaborative performing in terms of performance outcomes, its quality of interaction, and member satisfaction?**



This phase is not necessarily the end of the process, but can signal renewal and moving through the development cycle again. All groups ebb and flow, achieving goals, then defining new directions. Some collaboratives end and permit something new to arise out of the ashes. The capacity built with member organizations and individuals always makes it possible for organizations to transform into new processes and strategic plans.

A trans-organizational system is an emerging form of organization. As a tool, it is useful to deal with turbulence and complexity in the environment by developing a common vision to guide systems change. Often a collaborative is the only way to redirect a stagnant system and introduce efficiency into fragmented service delivery systems. It can also be used to mobilize the political power of inter-organizational collaboration, a very effective organizational form for lobbying purposes.

A collaborative can be an effective vehicle to create and disseminate a new vision and direction for large scale systems such as communities, sectors or industries or for community/ academic partnerships designed to bridge gap between end users and academics.

### **Resources available at [www.joanroberts.com](http://www.joanroberts.com):**

Boutillier, Marie, O'Connor, Pauline, Zizys, Tom, Roberts, Joan, and Banasiak Krista (2008) Does Collaborative Service Delivery Improve Client and Organization Outcomes? A Review of the Evidence on NPO Collaboration in Health and Social Services

Roberts Joan and O'Connor Pauline (2008) Inter-Agency Service Collaboration in the NPO Sector - Report Overview.

Roche, Brenda and Roberts Joan (2008) The East Scarborough Storefront Project: A Successful Inter-Organizational Service Collaboration

Roberts, Joan, (2008) Re-Visioning Project with the Korean Interagency Network

Roberts, Joan, (2004) Alliances Coalitions and Partnerships, Building Collaborative Organizations, New Society Publishers.

Roberts, Joan (2010) Governance for Collaboratives: Resolving Power and Issues, Joan Roberts Consulting.