

Successful Collaborative Partnerships:
Key Elements and a Self-Assessment Inventory

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Elements of Successful Partnerships¹

I. Introduction

CG Centers are being asked to address increasingly complex problems, adapt to rapid changes in technology, work across disciplines, produce more with limited resources, and increase the sustainability of research. These demands have significantly increased the need for researchers to work effectively in collaborative relationships.

While widely viewed as beneficial, effective collaboration can be very difficult to achieve. The challenges to effective collaboration increase as the number of people and organizations involved in the collaborative effort increase. Collaborative partnerships therefore are the most complex and challenging to manage.

Some well-known challenges for collaborative relationships stem from unexamined and unexplored differences in:

- goals and vision,
- organizational language and culture,
- balance of power,
- expectations of procedures and accountability,
- assumptions of authorities and structure, and
- trust levels.

Strong interpersonal, leadership, and management skills combined with a facilitated process dramatically increase the likelihood that a collaborative relationship will produce the desired *"collaborative advantage"*.

Collaborative advantage, involves the "creation of synergy between collaborating organizations" (Huxham, 1996), "creating new value together" (Moss Kanter, 1994), and "allows for the elaboration of new purpose and capability" (Gray, 1989; McCann, 1983; Trist, 1983).

Collaborative advantage will be achieved when something unusually creative is produced - perhaps an objective is met - that no organization could have produced on its own and when each organization, through the collaboration, is able to achieve its own objectives better than it could alone. (Huxham, 1993: 603)

The opportunity to create collaborative advantage exists in the various working relationships but requires the development and use of interpersonal, leadership and management skills which are often different from the technical skills of CG center staff.

¹ For more detailed information on partnerships, see Organizational Change Briefing Note - No. 3. [Developing and Managing Collaborative alliances: Lessons From a Review of the Literature.](#)

This briefing note draws from the literature on collaborative alliances and recent work with CG centers to develop a framework for successful partnerships - those which create the collaborative advantage.

II. Elements of Successful Partnerships



Foundation Elements

Foundation Elements are those actions that need to be addressed in the initial stages of forming partnerships. If dealt with successfully, a climate of openness and trust begins to develop. Research has shown the investment in building a strong foundation for a partnership is a significant determinant of future success.

Compelling Vision

Partnerships need members and leaders who can develop compelling visions, a strong sense of purpose, and trust and commitment among the members and their home organizations. A shared vision and sense of purpose is what holds the alliance together. It defines the problems to be addressed and the strategies to be used. It defines the scope of work, clarifies boundaries, and helps to keep the partnership from straying off the original intent.

Collaborative partnerships are powered by compelling visions and sense of purpose. For example, a recent study by the World Resources Institute found that the concept of “sustainable agriculture” serves as an inspiring and motivating vision which captures people’s imagination and enhances their commitment. Compelling visions are often marked by achieving significant social or economic impacts as well as achieving technical advances or other objectives such as improving institutional capacity.

Strong and Shared Leadership

From the start leaders need to portray their eagerness to develop a collaborative relationship and build a shared ownership of the problem and outcome. They need to help the partnership develop the shared vision; see the potential for the partnership, address the different interests of the organizations; and facilitate the management of boundaries and resources.

Leadership needs to help the members understand and appreciate the different motivation and interests, concerns, and social and cultural norms of the individual members and their home organizations.

Leaders need to model trust-building actions at the onset of the relationship. These actions are:

- involving others,
- using others input or opinions,
- demonstrating a willingness to explore new ideas,
- being honest,
- showing a willingness to exchange ideas,
- exhibiting sensitivity, i.e. cultural, emotional.

Successful partnerships are most often developed with the help of skilled facilitation, either by the leader, another group member or an outside professional. Leaders are responsible for ensuring that a facilitated process is used and that the facilitator, whether an internal or external person, is skilled in group process and understands the complexity of forming a collaborative relationship among organizations.

At the beginning stages of development, partnerships are more dependent on the leadership to build the foundation elements on which all the partners eventually can stand.

Shared Problem Definition and Approach

Partners need to be involved in the initial definition of the problem being addressed. Agreements must be reached on the specific problem to be solved, the analytical framework(s) to be used to solve the problem, and strategies for implementing the research agenda. In order to create a shared definition of the problem, each partner must make an effort to understand the problem from the other partners' point of view. Doing this in an international setting requires time and a commitment to learn how each partners' culture (both organizationally and personally), and professional discipline shapes their cognitive approach and contribution to the problem definition and implementation approach.

Power Equity

All parties in a partnership need to feel they are respected by the other partners and that their contribution is valued. Each organization needs to feel it can influence the direction and focus of the partnerships' vision and strategy. Often members can feel intimidated by other partners' positions and affiliations.

Some important behavioral factors to consider in creating power equity are:

- active and full participation,
- information sharing,
- negotiated priorities,
- clear assignment of roles and responsibilities, and
- equitable distribution of funds and other resources.

All of these can signal to partners how much power and status is being accorded to them by other partners. When partners feel devalued or not properly (from their perspective) recognized or given credit for their contribution, the partnership process may break down or the results may fall short of the overall goal of the collaboration.

Another common mistake is failing to explicitly talk about assumptions each partner has of the other partners--thinking you know why others are joining in the partnership arrangement. There needs to be a process whereby each partner can freely express and discuss their organization's assumptions and then collectively agree on what each can expect from the relationship. These discussions contribute greatly toward each partner organization feeling empowered and valued.

Interdependency and Complementarity

Partners need to see their interdependency early on in the formation of the partnership. The interdependency is especially appropriate and necessary when the challenge being addressed is complex and requires a broad knowledge base, new technology and diverse expertise. Each member needs to bring skills, knowledge, or resources to the partnership that complement those of other members. Members need to see that together the partnership will create new value--something they couldn't do on their own. This is the essence of achieving the collaborative advantage. Members must be viewed as legitimate contributors. Partnerships burdened with members who do not bring something new to the table are likely to have significant problems with inertia, unfulfilled commitments, and cumbersome decision making.

Partners must feel that their organization has resources (knowledge, skill, etc.) that will strengthen the relationship and are different from what others bring. Partnerships are most effective when organizations choose to work together from a position of individual strength. An organization that enters into a partnership because of weakness or for survival reasons will put too much dependency on other partners and creates unrealistic expectations.

While bringing resources and expertise to partnerships is essential, it is also imperative that an organization feels the partnership will advance their own strategic priorities.

Mutual Accountability

Given the interdependency of partnerships, success depends on each contributing member fulfilling their responsibilities and commitments in a timely fashion. Developing shared ownership and personal stake in the outcome are strong motivational elements for holding partners accountable. Many times, however, the only leverage partners have is the appeal of the vision and the accompanying "good will" that has developed. Partnerships with agreed upon norms and sanctions and enough power and authority vested in the group to exercise these sanctions have a greater ability to hold members accountable than those appealing to "good will".

In addition to exercising actual sanctions and rewards other actions which can inspire, motivate and sustain partners' commitment regardless of their individual interests. These actions are:

- establishing milestones,
- developing short and long-term indicators,
- setting quality standards for research results,
- identifying benefits,
- producing clear time frames,
- monitoring for results,
- celebrating small wins, and
- according appropriate recognition and credit to all involved.

Accountability can be undermined by two situations: 1) members who do not carry out the planned research, leading others to feel that resources have been squandered, and 2) partners who are highly sought after and thus feel more independent than interdependent.

Sustaining Elements

Sustaining Elements are those actions which maintain the energy, commitment and enthusiasm necessary for the partnership over time.

Attention to Process

Attention to process means developing and reaching agreement on guidelines that help the group deal with the following:

- communications between members,
- decision making and approaches to solving problems,
- cross-cultural and non-verbal communication,
- resolving conflicts,
- dealing with power differentials, and
- giving and receiving feedback.

When these guidelines are not followed, feedback needs to be given. Specifically, people need to hear how their behavior is adversely or positively affecting the groups' work. Giving feedback may be more sensitive when there are power imbalances, strong cultural differences and inter-organizational political issues. When these conditions exist, it is essential to rely on previously agreed to guidelines for giving and receiving feedback.

Institutionalizing the role of a neutral process expert as the facilitator and selecting a facilitator who is seen as fair and competent are important aspects of paying attention to process.

Communication Linkages

It is necessary to create “dense webs”² or links between the partners at the senior leadership level as well as with the partners at the operational level. These links establish a climate for frequent and in-depth information sharing; increase understanding of the scope of talent and skill each partner can contribute; and allow for the exploration of other opportunities for future collaborations. Nurturing these interpersonal relationships and building rapport and interest in learning helps partners discover what new value they can create together.

Members representing organizations in the partnership must continue to keep the “home” organization informed about the partnership progress and aware of the benefits coming from the partnership.

Partnerships involving members from different locations need to place special emphasis on maintaining continuity between meetings by regular contact using phone, fax or E-mail. Clarity about expectations of what is to be reported and how to communicate progress is essential to partnerships.

Explicit Decision Making Process

Successful partnerships have clear agreements on how the partners will make decisions. The decision-making process needs to allow for active participation and consensus building, and at the same time be efficient. Agreements need to be explicit regarding how much reporting and documentation needs to occur, who needs to be involved in making decisions and how quickly decisions need to be made.

Real or perceived power imbalances among members can aggravate conflict and need to be taken into account when designing decision-making structures. In addition, decision making can be complicated because members may be governed by the decision-making practices and authorities of their home organizations.

Trust and Commitment

Creating complete commitment to the partnership’s vision and goals takes time. Trust and commitment develop as a result of:

- people doing what they say they will do,
- understanding and protecting the interests of all members,
- listening with the intent to understand what others are saying,
- being honest about what the partner organization can contribute to the effort (not hiding limitations),

² [Collaborative Advantage: The Art of Alliances](#) by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Harvard Business Review

- sharing successes with others and/or taking responsibilities for mistakes,
- a willingness to occasionally pursue the interest of another over personal self-interest,
- developing a shared set of values around both the expected output of the partnership and the processes for carrying out the work.

Credit and Recognition

One of the major challenges in sustaining motivation and achieving quality results is how people will be acknowledged and rewarded for their successful efforts. Not all partners will have the same incentives or rewards. Agreements must be reached near the onset of the relationship about visibility, authorship and intellectual property rights. of the major challenges in sustaining motivation and achieving quality results is how people will be acknowledged and rewarded for their successful efforts. Not all partners will have the same incentives or rewards. Agreements must be reached near the onset of the relationship about visibility, authorship and intellectual property rights. Sharing credit and giving recognition are two simple but very important ways to build trust and commitment within the partnership. Every opportunity should be taken to acknowledge member's contributions and provide visibility for members and the partnership as a whole.

III. Partnership Self-Assessment Inventory

Introduction

Partnerships are complex relationships that require deliberate formation and maintenance. Research shows there are predictable characteristics or elements found in successful partnerships. By focusing on these elements in the beginning, new partnerships can “get started” faster and with less difficulty. Existing partnerships can assess whether they have overlooked any of these elements which might be contributing to current difficulties. Either way, new or established partnerships can take a moment, reflect on which of these elements are strengths, and identify through this self-assessment inventory where to focus attention for future improvement.

It is suggested that this self-assessment inventory be used as a means for all members to provide feedback on the partnership’s strengths and weaknesses. The results of the inventory should be shared during a facilitated discussion where members can discuss the information and explore ways of improving targeted areas. Please note that this inventory is intended to help partnerships prioritize their limited time and resources by acknowledging where they are doing well and by targeting selected areas for improvement.

Remember this is not an evaluation of the partnership’s capacity. This is feedback that will help focus the partnership’s attention and energy to increase effectiveness in areas that are not current strengths.

Use the following 7-point rating scale to indicate your partnership’s current level of skill and effectiveness.

- 1= We need to focus on this immediately**
- 2= We will need to focus on this in the next couple of months**
- 3= We need to get better at this, but it is not our priority**
- 4= We are doing this inconsistently**
- 5= We are doing this with regularity**
- 6= We are doing this well, to an advanced level**
- 7= We do this in an exemplary way and can be used as a “best practice” or model to others**
- N/A = Not seen in action or not observed**

Partnership – Self-Assessment

(Circle One)

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

Compelling Vision

1. The partnership has a clear and compelling vision that is exciting, worthy of the combined efforts, and will have impact.
2. It is clear how these organizations can create the value-added impact desired from the partnership and the role of each member.
3. Members can articulate partnership goals and how each parent organization contributes to achieving that goal.
4. The vision is used as a reference point in prioritization of activities and resources and keeping the partnership on track.

Strong & Shared Leadership

1. Members share leadership where appropriate, not overly relying on any one person for all of the leadership functions.
2. Leadership is facilitative rather than directive, involving members in decisions, problem solving, and planning.
3. Members are willing and supportive followers, contributing to planning. Problem solving and assisting the leader in other ways.
4. Members use both successes and mistakes as learning opportunities to increase skills in analysis and future decision making.

Shared Problem Definition

1. All partners participate in the definition of the problem being addressed.
2. Members can articulate others' concerns and/or interests in the problem being addressed.
3. The members have and use a common approach or framework for addressing the problem.
4. Partnership meetings are held with the frequency required to ensure full communication, adequate problem solving, and efficient progress towards project goals.

Interdependency & Complementarity

- | | |
|--|-------------------|
| 1. The partnership uses and respects the diverse skills, knowledge and backgrounds of its members. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |
| 2. The partnership can create new value – something that individual members could not achieve on their own. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |
| 3. Members believe that each member’s contribution is essential for the total outcome of the partnership goal. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |
| 4. Members and/or their parent organizations have the skills necessary to achieve the partnership goal. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |

Mutual Accountability

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| 1. Members share a sense of responsibility for partnership results, not just the results for which they are individually responsible. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |
| 2. Members have agreed upon norms and processes for holding each other accountable. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |
| 3. Partners pitch in and help others who are experiencing problems or needing assistance to meet deadlines or outputs. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |
| 4. Members give timely and specific feedback to each other when appropriate. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |

Attention to Process

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| 1. Members respond to feedback and criticism without getting defensive. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |
| 2. Members express ideas openly and honestly without irritating others. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |
| 3. Members monitor that all voices are heard before decisions are made. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |
| 4. The partnership has agreements for how it will work together and these are used and periodically checked for consistency of use. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |

Communication

- | | |
|---|-------------------|
| 1. Members keep other partners appropriately informed about work, contacts, problems, accomplishments, and progress. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |
| 2. In partnership discussions members emphasize the open, inclusive and respectful sharing of thoughts and ideas. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |
| 3. Members deal openly and constructively with problems and conflict not allowing these hinder the partnership's performance. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |
| 4. Members keep their parent organization informed about partnership activities, challenges and progress. | 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A |

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

Decision Making/Power Equity

1. The decision making process is clear and transparent to all members.
2. Members can provide input and have equal opportunity to influence decisions and the direction of the partnership's strategy.
3. Resource allocation within the partnership is transparent and in line with principles agreed upon by the partnership.
4. Decisions are recorded and shared with all those involved or affected by the decisions.

Trust

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1. Members share and act according to agreed upon values regarding the expected output of the partnership and the processes for carrying out the work.
2. Members deliver on promises and commitments made.
3. Members are direct about organizational interests and expectations; keeping covert or hidden agendas to a minimum.
4. Members are willing to compromise or make organizational sacrifices of self-interest so that the needs of other partners are met.

Credit

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1—2—3—4—5—6—7—N/A

1. The partnership has explicit agreements on how to handle visibility, authorship and intellectual property of individual members and the partnership.
2. Members recognize contributions to the partnership by individuals and their organizations.
3. Members share responsibility to ensure parent organizations demonstrate commitment to broader partnership goals.
4. Members are watchful for opportunities to acknowledge others for their contributions.

Scoring Your Questionnaire Responses

After completing your ratings, transfer the points for each question to the appropriate box below.

Elements	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
Compelling Vision					
Strong & Shared Leadership					
Shared Problem Definition & Approach					
Interdependency & Complementarity					
Mutual Accountability					
Attention to Process					
Communication					
Decision Making and Power Equity					
Trust & Commitment					
Credit & Recognition					

Interpreting Your Questionnaire Responses

Based on your ratings, which two elements are the strongest for your partnership?

- 1.
- 2.

Which two elements need improvement?

- 1.
- 2.

What specific changes/actions would improve these areas?

Share your assessment with others in your partnership for a collective look at the strengths and needed improvements