



10 Best Practices of Successful Collaboratives

A successful collaboration is a process to achieve an outcome. Simply following the steps to organize a collaborative will not necessarily result in a successful collaboration. A truly successful collaboration involves numerous qualitative characteristics that, together, constitute the “best” way to “practice” collaborative action — or best practices for successful collaborations.

Are some factors more important and some less important? Can a collaborative succeed if it has most, but not all, of the factors? There are no simple answers to these questions. Yet the research reported in literature and the experts agree that nurturing the collaborative spirit in all participants deserves careful attention.

Experts also agree that the process of collaboration and the resulting outcomes will occur if organizational leaders and staff members believe that collaboration is not only important but essential. Collaboration requires a different attitude and perspective beyond how organizations mutually plan, provide, and evaluate services. It requires powerful commitments within the system and the individuals. Further, the interpersonal, problem-solving skills required in collaboration will be skills many collaborators have not previously used in their work, so make sure to build training and support into the collaborative process.

The following quick-reference matrix shows the ten best practices for successful collaboratives

Have a Clear Purpose.	People need a reason to participate in the process. A common understanding of the issues supports the development of a clear purpose for the group.
Invite All Appropriate Interested Parties to Participate in the Collaborative.	Ensure that all members of the collaborative have an interest in the issue and come to the table in good faith, committed to full participation — which includes sticking with the effort until the issues are resolved. Encourage participants to commit to respectful conversation and accept diverse values and interests. Early on, encourage participants to acknowledge where the past has created distrust and to commit to going beyond it. Encourage participants to obtain the executive support of their agency or organization so that they can implement the group’s decisions. And make sure participants agree to communication processes that ensure their accountability to the constituencies they represent.
Support the Activities and Passion of the Champions.	Collaboratives thrive when top-level leaders of the participating organizations champion achievement of the collaborative’s goals by being visibly involved and encouraging collaborative practices. True champions tend to be individuals who are passionate about the collaborative’s purpose and goals — people who by virtue of their own passion and commitment will not rest until the collaborative successfully achieves its goals. Look for the impassioned champions among the leaders in your collaborative, and be ready to follow their lead.
Share Leadership and Responsibility for Attaining Goals.	Recruit leaders with skills to build trust and organize. Make sure the group has at least one participant, and preferably more, with skills to facilitate joint problem solving and shared decision making.



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Develop Policies and Procedures in Support of the Collaborative.	Let the collaborative design the organizational structure and related policies and procedures. Embrace group processes such as consensus building, shared decision making and conflict resolution. Importantly, make sure the decision-making process is clear — agreement on the process ensures that all participants accept how the group will operate. Further, it empowers collaborators to take charge and make decisions.
Create Workable Solutions and Implement Them.	Make sure participants understand the needs, concerns, and aspirations of all other members of the group. From this understanding, groups will develop creative solutions that address the needs of many, not just a few. Mutually agreed-upon information is a powerful tool, and clear information is a keystone of success. Therefore, throughout the process, make sure that all information is equally available to all participants. Develop communication systems to support implementation of decisions made by the group, and continuously document agreements. Balance short- and long-term actions that members of the collaborative can actively support.
Ensure Adequate Resources.	Make sure you have the funding, staff time, physical space, contacts, and other necessary resources to gather information on which to base collaborative decisions and to implement work plans. Pool resources for long-term activities that are managed by the collaborative structure. Share resources among members of the collaborative, as appropriate.
Take Time.	Acknowledge that the process of collaboration does not happen overnight. Allow the process of collaboration to evolve. Be patient.
Foster a Collaborative Spirit.	On the surface, collaboration is about bringing together resources to work toward a common purpose. However, it is collaborative relationships that make collaboratives work — relationships based on openness, trust, and an understanding that complex issues require a common vision, joint activities, and a commitment to resolving the issues.
Do Something, Celebrate, Do Something Else, and Celebrate Again.	Collaboration is a process to achieve an outcome. Often, just being engaged in the process of moving closer to your goal is important progress — even if you haven't achieved your goal yet. Regularly share and celebrate that progress by acknowledging incremental successes and contributions by all interest holders and by building on your successes.

Adapted from: California Department of Developmental Services. *Best Practices in Inter-Organizational Collaboration, A How-To Manual for Organizations Working to Integrate Services for Persons with ASD and Their Families*. Sacramento, 2008. Pages 19-21

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