

# Collaboration

*Collaboration makes sense but can be surprisingly difficult in practice. In this article, Simon Bowes, Director at People Intelligence, highlights how the right kinds of preparation play to everyone's advantage.*



## The potential benefits of collaboration

- Increasingly, funders require collaboration within their funding criteria. A good track record of collaboration is a head start towards attracting funding.
- Many complex issues cannot be addressed by a single organisation: collaboration here is not just beneficial but essential.
- Single organisations may be able to fulfil most of the requirements of a funder but not all: collaboration can fill the gap.
- Even when a single organisation can fully meet the requirements of a funder, collaboration can provide imaginative and valuable additional benefits.
- Collaboration brings valuable expertise into an organisation.
- Finally, the constraints on public and voluntary organisations are such that the costs of collaboration are quickly offset by the gains in shared good practice and experience.

## The potential difficulties of collaboration

- Imbalances of power, for example a funding organisation working with an organisation that it funds, may skew the process.
- Imbalances of reward, for example an organisation which has much to contribute but little or nothing to gain.
- The inclusion of organisations that are needed for funding purposes but have little to contribute.
- Lack of clarity about the purpose of collaboration.
- Lack of agreement about the purpose of collaboration.
- Lack of resources at start up or after (not always funds: even arranging meetings calls for a meeting space, someone to take on an agenda, arranging dates etc).
- Lack of process training. It's important to think about group dynamics, group needs, communication styles, decision making and similar if different organisations, with different cultures, are to work well together.
- Lack of systems.
- The wrong representatives from an organisation. Need people with the authority to make decisions, the seniority to represent their organisations, access to appropriate resources (including support staff, if needed) and excellent people skills.

## Process isn't just important, it's imperative in collaboration

Process is key to the success, or failure, of collaboration. Process simply means 'how we work together'. Time spent on answering each of the following four questions may make all the difference to the eventual success of the collaboration.

### 1. What do we know about each other as individuals?

How was each person selected? Volunteer or conscript? What is each person's 'style'? - Focus on ideas; get things done; make sure the systems are fit for purpose; keep everyone on board? No one style is better than the rest, but each is important. Can each person make decisions on behalf of his/her organisation? Has everyone worked in collaboration in the past? Is there any 'history' between two or more of the individuals, and will it affect the collaboration as a whole?

### 2. What do we know about each other as organisations?

What does each organisation do? What is its culture (top down, relaxed, systems driven, flexible)? Is it under pressure to succeed in the collaboration? Are there mandatory requirements, must do or must not do, which could cause the organisation to withdraw from the collaboration? Is there any 'history' between two or more organisations? Are there, for example, organisations that have not delivered in the past or who have a reputation for being 'difficult'? Important to put cards on the table. Are the right organisations round the table? Are there any gaps? If so, who will fill them?

### 3. What is the background of the collaboration?

How did it start? A government requirement? The result of a successful funding application? The result of a charismatic person, or group, driving for collaboration? Is everyone truly on board or do some feel that they are there to 'make up numbers' or as 'token representatives'?

### 4. How will the collaborators make decisions?

Who is leading the collaboration? Do they want to lead, are they prepared to lead, and to the others accept their leadership? How will decisions be made and is a majority vote acceptable? Where will the collaborators meet? Who will provide venues? Are the venues fair for all who attend (e.g. not too distant)? Will anyone take notes or are all expected to make their own notes? How will collaborators know that they have noted the right things? Will collaborators be able to make decisions if one or more organisations are not present? What will they do if they feel that one or more organisation is not pulling its weight?

It is not necessary to have complete answers to these questions before commencing. It is vital to air them and to make an early commitment to answer them."

## Is collaboration right for us?

The following questions will help you to work out whether or not collaboration is right for you.

Are we clear about the purpose of the collaboration?

Does the collaboration support our mission?

Is this the right time for us to collaborate?

Will we have a position of influence within the collaboration?

Are we likely to gain, in useful ways, from the collaboration?

Are there any risks arising from collaboration that should concern us?

Do we have the right person to support the collaboration?

Is that person senior enough to take decisions on our behalf?

Does that person have good people skills?

Can that person stay the course?

Can we release that person and cover for lost time?

