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Collaboration and Community Capacity

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Collaborative efforts are designed to bring varied groups, individuals, and agencies together to work on problems not easily solved by one group alone. Thus the community's capacity is increased. Such an effort is not easily accomplished and sustained. The National Network for Collaboration has created a "collaboration framework" which was presented by Extension educators Heidi Barker and Ellen Rowe(1) at the 1996 national conference of the Association of Leadership Educators (ALE). The following is based on their presentation and materials made available.

"Collaboration is a process of participation through which people, groups and organizations work together to achieve desired results." (2) When starting such a joint effort, it is critical that all parties share the same vision and purpose. Although a serious problem or crisis may initially bring the groups together, the subsequent effort must move from "problem driven" to "vision driven" with defined relationships and expected outcomes.

In collaboration the purpose is to: "accomplish shared vision and impact benchmarks" and to build an "interdependent system to address issues and opportunities." (3) Structurally, the links between and among groups are formal and written in work assignments. Roles, time, and evaluation are formalized and consensus is used in shared decision-making. The process with collaboration involves high trust levels, highly developed communication, equally shared ideas and decisions, and high productivity.

The collaboration framework consists of four common elements. They are:

1. grounding,
2. core foundation,
3. outcomes, and
4. process and contextual factors.

The collaboration framework elements are all grounded in valuing and respecting diversity. Thus all perspectives are respected; this respect tends to increase overall support for the necessary shared vision and courses of action.

The core foundation represents a common ground of understanding. It focuses on creating a common purpose and revolves around the vision, mission, and values and principles of operation. It's evolution continues in an unending process in the on-going collaborative effort.

Outcomes are the broad and relatively long-termed "conditions" or "working environment" in a community. They are not tangible in the sense of building a senior citizens' center but they result from the behavior and actions of people involved in the collaborative effort. Outcomes include the level of public safety, state of education, and economic well-being of the community.

Process factors cover specific skills and components such as leadership, communication, and understanding of the community. Contextual factors include the political climate, resources, catalysts for getting the collaboration started, policies, and the history of working together

The process and contextual factors impact on the outcomes while the core foundation and the outcomes interact on each other as the collaborative efforts continue. This collaborative framework was designed as a guide to form new collaborations. It can be used to help existing collaborative efforts as well as evaluate the progress of developing collaborations.

For more information contact: The National Network for Collaboration, 203 Ag Admin Bldg., 2120 Fyffe Rd., Columbus, Ohio, 43210.

(1) Heidi Barker and Ellen Rowe are educators in the New Hampshire and Vermont Extension organizations respectively.

(2) Collaboration Framework...Addressing Community Capacity, National Network for Collaboration, Columbus, Ohio, 1995, p. 2..

(3) Ibid, p. 3.



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