SUPER COLLABORATIONS: Guidance On How To Create Positive Relationships

A working definition of collaboration is joining together to make possible that which cannot be accomplished alone. Collaboration allows partners to reach an aspiration that would be impossible to achieve without each member of the team working toward the same end. It requires the partnership and the commitment of all members working toward a common goal to succeed.

Have a clear goal in mind when you form or seek collaborators. Make sure everyone involved understands what the goal is and believes that the goal is worthwhile. While the overarching goal of collaboration is to achieve something together that you would not be able to achieve alone; sometimes that's in the nature of the finished product, but other times the gain is efficiency. Either way, the people who are collaborating should have some kind of shared vision. It may be helpful to make your first collaboration a mission statement or a name for your group.

Using a consultant is helpful to forming and establishing collaborations. Consultants can be helpful observers, provide an organizational framework for seeking and developing collaborations, getting work completed and diplomatically pointing out difficult issues as they arise. They can also provide much needed facilitation for groups, and help to keep busy collaborators on track with their goals.

WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?
There are three common features of competent collaborative group members:
The essential skills and abilities to conduct the work;
a strong desire to contribute; and
the capacity to collaborate effectively.

Another way to think of this is “team spirit,” or a sense of loyalty and dedication to the group. It is often exhibited by an unrestrained sense of excitement and enthusiasm for the group and its work; a willingness to do anything that has to be done to help the group succeed; and an intense identification with the people who are collaborating.

WHAT IS A COLLABORATIVE CLIMATE
A collaborative climate is most commonly described in the adage, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” A team operating in a truly collaborative climate work well together and trust is a mainstay virtue.

Trust is produced in a climate that includes three elements:
honesty (i.e., integrity and truthfulness);
consistency (i.e., predictable behavior and responses); and
respect (i.e., treating people with dignity and fairness).
HOW TO START
Talk to others; you never know how you could benefit someone or an organization and vice versa. Often the most unlikely partners form the best collaborations because they are different. A cup of coffee discussion can be the start of a new collaboration!

Establish a vision of the future;
enlist others to embrace the vision;
create change; and
unleash the energy and talent of contributing members.

ONCE YOU HAVE FOUND COLLABORATORS
Create a results-driven structure within your team that is appropriate for the goal you want to achieve. That could be as simple as designating a chair or group leader for leading meetings, keeping the group on track, and asking for help with specific tasks. Often these groups do not have a hierarchical structure so provide each member of the project a way to define his or her own role on the team. One way to approach this is to write down all the tasks that need to be carried out. For each task, ask who’s interested in that task, and write their names next to it. Ideally, everyone will gravitate towards different roles, but many times a few roles are in high demand, and a few roles are unpopular. A solution to this is to rotate the most unpopular roles (which are usually monotonous enough for this). Another idea is to outsource the some task(s).

Establish a communications system. Make sure it allows collaborators to discuss team issues in a relaxed environment; create ways of documenting issues raised and decisions made. Using shared documents, such as Dropbox and e-mail can help with keeping everyone in the loop.

Establish ways to monitor performance and provide feedback. Periodically, meet together to discuss ways to improve on the project. There should be some metrics by which you can monitor your progress. It could be an event plan with timeline, a list of tasks, roles and responsibilities with reporting out during meetings.

Seek consensus. Disagreements are common in any group effort. When conflicts arise, seek consensus from all members on resolution. It's important that every person in the group stands behind the group decision, whether they agree with it or not; so open communications that include trust are essential.

WHAT YOU CAN DO AS AN INDIVIDUAL
Create a collaborative climate. Prove that you are trustworthy, respect others, and be consistent in your behavior and the way you respond to others.

Be humble and open to others' ideas and suggestions. The opposite of collaboration is a form of dictatorship, where one person tells everyone else what to do, and nothing is open for discussion.
Whereas a dictatorship is ego-driven, collaboration thrives on the quelling of egos. You need to accept that while your ideas might be good, someone else's ideas might be good too, and sometimes even better. Really listening to others and ensuring there is diversity within your collaboration will help you to achieve your goals.

Delegate tasks; rather than trying to do everything, it is best to divide and conquer. Let everyone find his or her strength and work therein to contribute to the common goal. If you feel overwhelmed, speak up, it’s okay.

Assume good faith; collaboration is based on the common good, and we work most effectively together on the assumption of good faith of one another. If someone is not acting in good faith, it will reveal itself soon enough. But if you point a finger mistakenly, the spirit of collaboration can easily turn sour.
SUPER COLLABORATIONS: A Framework To Get Started

Purpose Statement

Spend some time as a group figuring out what you are trying to accomplish, who needs to be at the table, what is our aspirational goal. Have a discussion around shared mission, passion, creation, problem solving, etc. Write it out, perhaps come up with a mission statement or name for your group with a purpose statement.

Scope of Collaboration

It is a good idea to talk about what exactly the group will be attempting: an event, community change, bringing art to a new audience, engaging in diverse discussions. What expectations will we set for ourselves, and what are we committing to each other, is this collaboration a priority in our busy lives? How will we invite others to join us? Are we giving of time, funds, resources? Is this a yearlong project? Capture the most important factors.

Brainstorming and Conceptualization

It is important to dream together and spend some time in facilitated brainstorming (see a consultant for process). This can help uncover opportunities, ideas, help you get to know each other better and it’s a lot of fun. You can identify the group’s strengths and weaknesses and start to hash out what you want to create together.

Structure: Roles & Responsibilities

Figure out together how you want to function, will you set up a committee structure or will it be freer flowing. How will you know you are on track to reach your goals, do you need to write a grant together, how will that work. What technology will you use to help communication? Remember this is an egalitarian working/volunteer group, so the typical hierarchical structure doesn’t function well long-term.

Inclusion

Seriously examine who is around the table and who is missing. Be honest with each other about where you are lacking in diversity. One of the benefits of collaboration is you get to work with people who bring different perspectives, new framing, and different experiences. This is what makes collaborations really work to create something other than the “usual”. Be bold.

Celebration

It has been a lot of hard work and fun so it’s important to stop and celebrate your accomplishments and each other. You made a difference through your collaboration, so share some food, raise a glass and toast to each other. It will help to fuel any future partnerships,
Feedback & Review

At the end of your work, schedule a meeting to review how things went. What worked well, what you would like to change and what didn’t work. It’s okay to be candid about this in a respectful manner. Nothing is perfect so talking about the Strength, Weaknesses, and Opportunities is really important, particularly if you are going to continue the collaboration.