Research Summary: Collaboration Strategies and Frameworks

July 2026

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Academy for Professional Excellence

WI Workforce Innovations

The Academy for Professional Excellence is a project of the
San Diego State University School of Social Work

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I. Background

Health and Human Services agencies face complex, systemic, and interconnected challenges that cannot be effectively addressed by individual organizations working in isolation. These multifaceted issues often require partnerships that align goals, connect systems, and enhance collective problem-solving capacity (Gajda, 2004).

When organizations work together towards a shared vision, they create opportunities to pool expertise and resources, learn from one another, and ultimately drive higher-quality decisions and outcomes (Entwistle, 2014). Research has consistently documented the benefits of partnership, suggesting that it leads to improved service delivery, increased social capital, and a greater ability to address complex challenges through innovative solutions (Hajjar et al., 2020).

However, partnership alone does not guarantee success. Collaborative efforts may fail if they lack the conditions necessary for initial formation, do not sustain the operational structures needed for ongoing engagement, or have flaws in their collaborative processes (McNamara et al., 2020). Research suggests three primary categories of factors associated with collaboration failure: organizational dynamics, interorganizational processes, and management. Within organizational dynamics, agency-based collaborations are particularly vulnerable to failure when partners have divergent goals, lack supportive staff, or face tight time or resource constraints. Failures related to interorganizational processes often stem from poor planning, unclear roles and responsibilities, weak governance structures, power imbalances, or a lack of perceived need for interdependence among partners. Lastly, management-related failures include a lack of trust, difficulty managing diverse perspectives, and the absence of a skilled convener to guide the work (McNamara et al., 2020).

To mitigate these common causes of collaboration failure, organizations must thoughtfully align their partnerships and establish the practices, structures, and processes needed to support collaborative work. This research summary provides evidence-based strategies, practical tools, and structured frameworks to support effective collaboration. While this report primarily focuses on inter-organizational collaboration, the strategies and models can be adapted to collaborative efforts across a variety of groups and settings.

II. Navigating Working Together

Partnerships are not one-size-fits-all. They exist along a spectrum of commitment and integration, and the depth of inter-organizational partnerships should align directly with the project's specific scope, goals, and desired outcomes (Keast et al., 2007). To describe

these varying degrees of partnership, researchers developed the "3Cs" continuum: Cooperation, Coordination, and Collaboration (Entwistle, 2014; Keast et al., 2007; Peterson, 1991; Woodland & Hutton, 2012). In fields such as human services, this continuum provides a framework for determining how organizations can work together most effectively. It allows organizations to minimize siloed efforts while strategically aligning resources and organizational commitment with the project's needs (Keast et al., 2007).

1. Cooperation is at the lowest end of the spectrum, where independent organizations share information to support each other's outcomes (Peterson, 1991).
2. Coordination represents the middle of the continuum, where partners align activities, share some decision-making, and pursue compatible goals (Peterson, 1991).
3. Collaboration is the highest level of this spectrum, in which organizations unite around a collective purpose, work on common tasks using jointly defined strategies, and implement them through comprehensive planning and communication (Moore & Lammert, 2017; Peterson, 1991).

While full collaboration offers significant benefits, it is also the most resource-intensive form of working together and is not always the most appropriate strategy. In practice, organizations often default to pursuing collaboration without first determining whether coordination or cooperation may be more appropriate. Selecting the right level of partnership helps ensure that the investment of time, resources, and organizational commitment is proportional to the desired outcomes. Table 1 provides guiding questions to help groups identify an appropriate approach and determine action steps for working together.

Table 1

Guiding Questions for Choosing an Approach to Working Together

Guiding Question	If Yes...	If No or Unclear...	Action Steps
1. Do all partners have a clear mission?	If yes, continue to question 2.	If no/unclear, see Action steps ➜	Develop a vision, mission statement, logic model, or theory of action as needed. Then, move to question 2.
2. Is there a common goal for this work?	If yes, continue to question 3.	If no/unclear, see Action steps ➜	Align partners on a clear, shared understanding of the purpose of collaboration and a common goal. Then, move to question 3. **If this is not possible,** consider cooperation rather than collaboration.
3. Is there a clear way for partners to avoid duplication and leverage each other's resources?	If yes, continue to question 4.	If no/unclear, see Action steps ➜	Establish mechanisms to limit overlap and leverage resources. Then, move to question 4. **If this is not possible,** consider cooperation, rather than collaboration.
4. Will the collaboration introduce efficiencies in the delivery of service, products, etc.?	If yes, continue to question 5.	If no/unclear, see Action steps ➜	Work together to identify efficiencies. Then, move to question 5. **If this is not possible,** consider coordination, rather than collaboration.
5. Can this work be done more effectively with collaboration?	If yes, continue to question 6.	If no/unclear, see Action steps ➜	Work together to target areas where joint work adds impact. Then, move to question 6. **If this is not possible,** consider coordination rather than collaboration.
6. Will tasks be driven by shared strategies, purpose, comprehensive planning, and communication?	If yes, pursue collaboration.	If no/unclear, see Action steps ➜	Work together to establish integrated strategies for tasks. Then, consider collaboration. **If this is not possible,** consider coordination rather than collaboration.

Note. Adapted from *What Does the Literature Say About the Effectiveness of Interorganizational Collaboration?* (p. 2), by H. Moore and J. Lammert, 2017, Center to Improve Program and Project Performance.

III. Understanding the Demands of Collaboration

Research in human services suggests that collaboration is a critical strategy in situations where prior methods are ineffective, particularly when innovative approaches are needed to address systemic challenges (Keast et al., 2007). These efforts often require significant time and investment to achieve long-term outcomes and may involve an initial trade-off in which groups prioritize intangible outcomes, such as relationship development and trust-building, before producing tangible deliverables, such as new projects or activities (Keast et al., 2007).

Additionally, collaboration requires a higher degree of commitment, shared responsibility, and joint effort than cooperation or coordination (Keast et al., 2007). It frequently involves complex interpersonal interactions, places demands on group members to work in new ways, and may be especially difficult for organizations competing for the same resources (Moore & Lammert, 2017).

IV. Strategies to Support Collaboration

To navigate these complexities, collaboration requires intentional planning, ongoing support, and continuous evaluation (Moore & Lammert, 2017). Its success relies not only on strong group dynamics to drive collective momentum (Martínez Orbegozo et al., 2022), but also on well-defined structures and processes that guide collaborative efforts (Moore & Lammert, 2017).

Group Dynamics

Research examining why certain cross-boundary collaborative groups progress from conversation to focused, learning-oriented action highlights three characteristics that contributed to their success (Martínez Orbegozo et al., 2022). Within this context, "progressing teams" are defined as those that have identified a focused course of action to address a significant part of the focal problem.

- Representation refers to the composition and diversity of the individuals participating in the collaboration. Progressing teams have broad stakeholder involvement and make an intentional, continuous effort to weave in diverse and external perspectives. They devote time to stakeholder engagement and integrate the experiences of those closest to the problem. To build and sustain meaningful representation, teams should continuously examine their composition, ask which voices are missing, and actively expand perspectives as new facets or challenges emerge.

- Trust is defined as the confidence among collaborative members and the interpersonal expectation that others' actions will not harm or exploit perceived vulnerabilities. Progressing teams cultivate psychological safety, in which members feel free to disagree, make mistakes, and ask for help. They intentionally apply trust-building strategies, including tools to align goals and empathize with different perspectives and assumptions (e.g., using The Ladder of Inference or writing each other's victory speech). By establishing communication norms, teams can protect the space and normalize the vulnerability required for psychological safety.
- Agency represents a team's capacity to "own" the work, make autonomous decisions, and self-guide their efforts. Progressing teams position themselves to advance their mission, exhibiting a vocal drive, shared enthusiasm, and belief that they play an important role. Within these teams, expertise is drawn upon, and leaders emerge organically, facilitating engagement and advancing tasks. To strengthen agency, team members can develop a deeper understanding of one another's motivations, expertise, and unique skills. Addressing individual motivations and leveraging strengths can help build collective confidence and commitment.

Structure and Processes

While strong group dynamics are essential, effective collaboration also depends on clear structures, defined processes, and shared expectations that guide the work (Moore & Lammert, 2017). While not every partnership requires a formal assessment, evaluating readiness to collaborate can increase the likelihood of success (Moore & Lammert, 2017). Readiness assessments may focus on individual partners' capacity and willingness to participate (e.g., Prevention Collaboration in Action Readiness Assessment) or on the collaborative group's overall readiness to work together effectively (e.g., Collaboration for Impact Readiness Assessment).

Beyond initial readiness, research suggests that successful collaborations are often characterized by a shared vision and goals, formal agreements, mutual benefit, and a willingness to share risks (McNamara et al., 2020). Additionally, the literature on inter-organizational collaboration identifies several operational factors that support effective collaboration (Moore & Lammert, 2017):

- Transparent communication: Clear, consistent lines of information flow between partners through an established communication plan.

- Guidelines for division of tasks: Defined steps for the division of tasks, roles, responsibilities, and avoiding duplicated efforts.
- Decision-making processes: Guidelines for shared decision-making that ensure all partners have a voice.
- Dedicated resources: Time and personnel specifically allocated to support the collaboration.
- Infrastructure: Shared space and tools to support collaborative work (e.g., a shared drive and guiding documents).
- Data-Driven Learning: Data collection and sharing processes for tracking progress, gathering insights from stakeholders, and informing decisions.

Together, these factors create the conditions necessary for collaborative efforts to move from relationship-building to coordinated action and measurable results.

Moving from understanding these core components to building an effective collaboration requires planning and shared design. Table 2 provides a practical roadmap for this process, including key questions, action steps, and the expected results.

Table 2

Planning Collaboration

Key Question	Action Steps	Expected Result
1. What are we planning to do?	☐ Discuss and agree on the meaning and purpose of collaboration. ☐ Work together to define collaboration using concrete terms and measurable criteria.	Shared definition of collaboration and its purpose in this context.
2. Why do we want to collaborate?	☐ Determine a shared purpose and desired outcomes. ☐ Document specific outcomes that can be achieved more effectively through collaboration.	Clear understanding of the purpose and value of collaboration.

3. How will we collaborate?	☐ Establish clear objectives. ☐ Jointly develop and document the decision-making processes that will be implemented. ☐ Jointly define and document roles and responsibilities of participating members. ☐ Create communication protocols and information-sharing channels. ☐ Establish processes to resolve disagreements and address conflicts.	Clear, jointly defined, documented, and credible process for collaboration.
4. How will we support the collaboration?	☐ Allocate resources. ☐ Dedicate staff time, personnel, and administrative support. ☐ Employ shared technology platforms and/or information systems. ☐ Develop processes for coordinating and managing the collaboration.	Supporting structures and resources are in place.
5. How will we know if we are effective?	☐ Develop leading indicators that can be collected across participating organizations. ☐ Develop short- and long-term outcome measures. ☐ Determine roles and responsibilities for data collection, analysis, and reporting. ☐ Establish a process for data-informed decision-making.	Leading and outcome indicators identified. Processes for collecting, analyzing, reporting, and using data established. Data routinely informs decision-making and continuous improvement.

Note. Adapted from *What Does the Literature Say About the Effectiveness of Interorganizational Collaboration?* (p. 4), by H. Moore and J. Lammert, 2017, Center to Improve Program and Project Performance.

V. Collaboration Frameworks

Depending on a group's goals and needs, different structural designs and governance approaches can help stakeholders coordinate their efforts and work together effectively. These elements enable diverse partners to organize their collective work, establish feedback loops, and build clear pathways for action (Ganeshu et al., 2024). The three frameworks outlined in this section offer different approaches for organizing, governing, and sustaining complex, multi-stakeholder collaboration efforts. While these models can be treated as mutually exclusive, collaborative groups may consider integrating tools and strategies across frameworks to best fit their unique needs.

Sociocracy

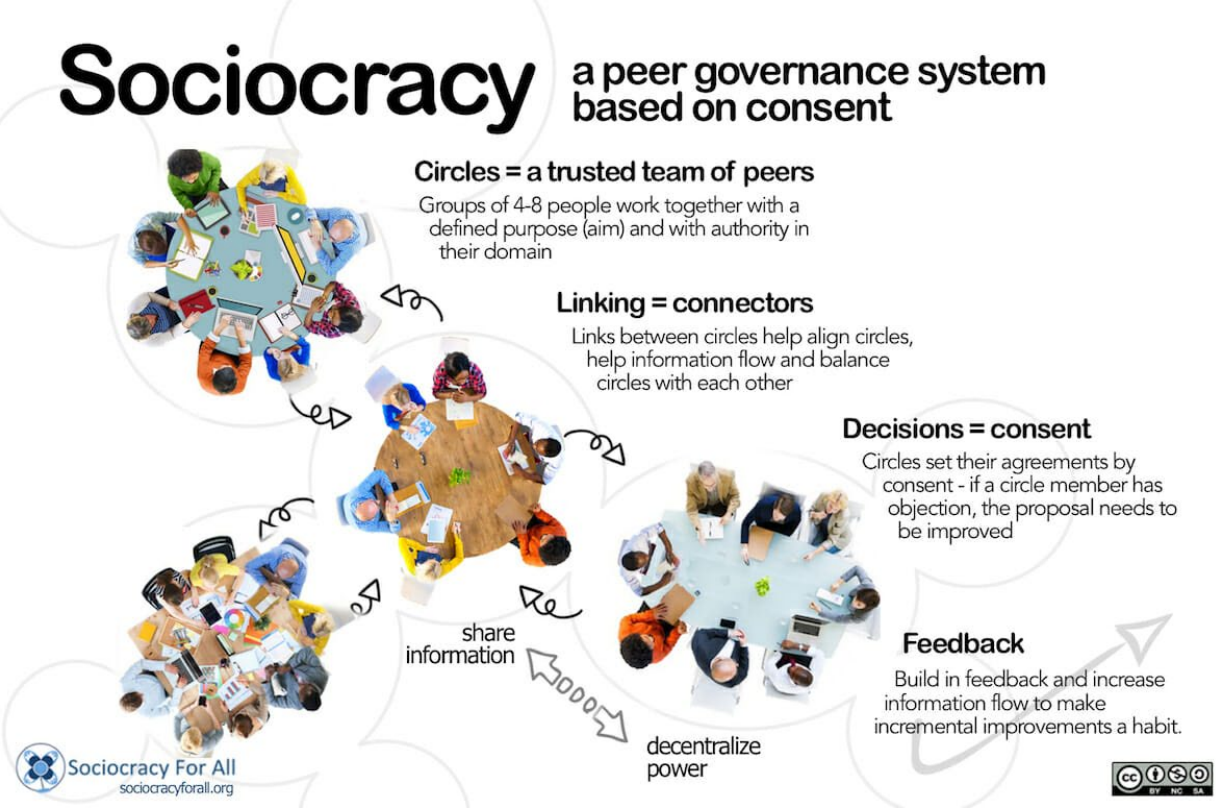
Sociocracy is an inclusive system of governance designed to enhance collaboration, engagement, and accountability. It addresses unclear or centralized decision-making by distributing authority among smaller, interconnected groups empowered to make decisions within their areas of responsibility (Rau, 2020).

Sociocracy embraces the motto "good enough for now and safe enough to try," promoting an iterative approach to work that values progress over perfection and keeps the work moving forward (Rau, 2019). Key features of Sociocracy include:

- Circles: Small groups work together in "circles" with a defined aim and full authority over their domain. Circle members have defined roles and may fill more than one role, ensuring clear accountability and smooth operations (Rau, 2017).
- Linking Roles: Members from one circle participate in related circles to streamline information flow and align decisions. Double linking assigns two people from a circle to serve as full members of its parent circle (Rau, 2020).
- Consent-based decision-making: Instead of striving for unanimous agreement or consensus, decisions move forward when there are no reasoned objections that would prevent the group from achieving its purpose. This approach honors everyone's needs because no objections can be ignored, while increasing efficiency by avoiding endless debates required to perfect every idea (Rau, 2020).
- Rounds: Each person in a meeting shares their input one by one until everyone has spoken once in that round. The goal is to hear all voices and encourage mutual listening and understanding (Rau, 2020).
- Continuous Improvement: A set of practices is put in place to gather intentional feedback within circles and the overall group. This may include feedback forms, meeting evaluations, and mandatory review dates for policies and progress. While these reviews follow the consent-based decision-making protocol, sociocracy maintains a clear distinction between gathering broad feedback and assigning decision-making authority. A core strength of this system is its ability to empower small groups to make swift, effective decisions while including intentional feedback from outside of the circle (Rau, 2020).

Figure 1

Sociocracy Diagram



Note. From *Sociocracy - basic concepts and principles*, by Sociocracy for All, 2020. https://www.sociocracyforall.org/sociocracy/

Collective Impact

The Collective Impact approach brings together a network of community members, organizations, and institutions to address complex problems and achieve system-level change. This framework emphasizes equity by grounding all work in local data and context, addressing power dynamics within the collaborative, and fostering inclusive leadership and accountability. It prioritizes deep systems change alongside everyday programs and actively listens to and acts with the community. These strategies are intentionally woven into the implementation of the five conditions necessary for successful collective impact (Collective Impact Forum & FSG, n.d.):

1. Common agenda: The participants collectively define the problem and a shared vision to solve it through agreed-upon actions.
2. Shared measurement: Participants agree on how to measure and report on progress, including a list of indicators to drive learning and improvement.

3. Mutually reinforcing activities: A diverse set of stakeholders draws on their unique strengths to coordinate a range of activities that are distinct yet mutually reinforcing.
4. Continuous communication: Participants maintain frequent, structured communication to build trust, align efforts, and sustain common motivation.
5. Backbone support: A defining feature of Collective Impact is a strong supporting infrastructure. An independent, dedicated backbone organization or team provides coordination, facilitation, data support, and administrative infrastructure to align the group's efforts.

The Collective Impact Structure

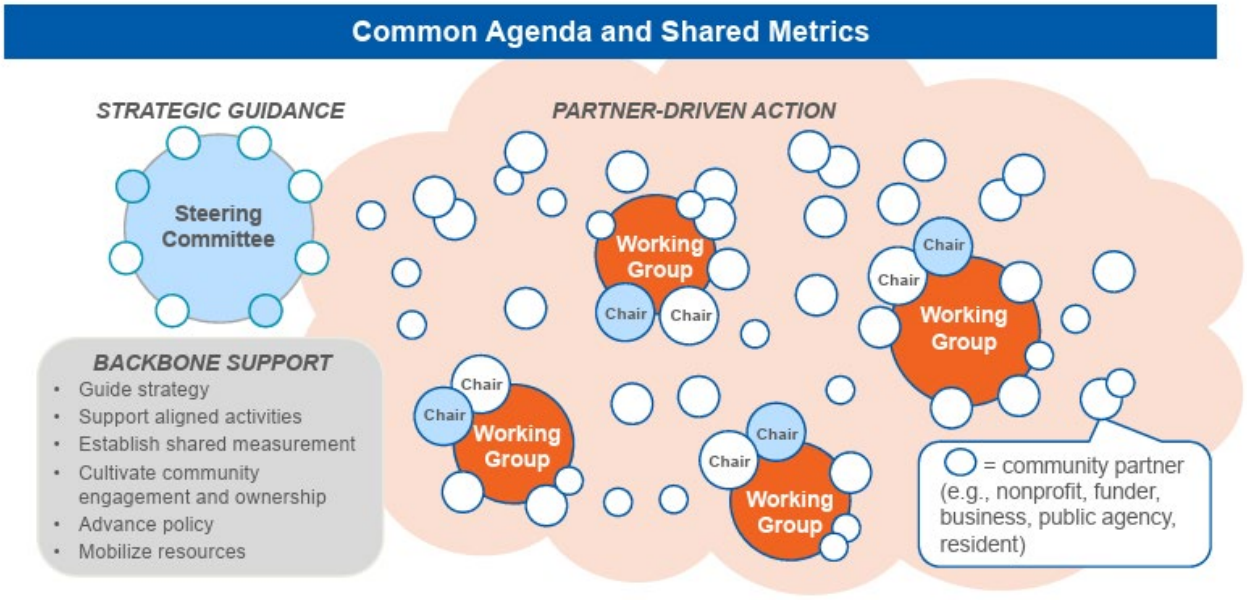
The Collective Impact structure is built on shared leadership and provides multiple avenues for stakeholder engagement. Although it's governed by a formal membership structure, it also seeks to incorporate perspectives and contributions of the broader community. The structure is intentionally dynamic, designed to evolve as initiatives mature, priorities shift, and new opportunities or challenges emerge (Collective Impact Forum & FSG, 2017). For example, working groups may adapt over time to reflect changing goals, emerging needs, and local conditions. The core components of the structure include:

- The Steering Committee operates at the highest level and comprises a diverse set of partners representative of the relevant system. This group is responsible for providing strategic direction, tracking progress, aligning efforts, and championing the work. The steering committee may also be referred to as the advisory group or leadership table (Collective Impact Forum & FSG, 2017).
- The Backbone is a core group of dedicated staff that plans, manages, and supports the initiative through the following functions: guiding vision and strategy through data collection and research, supporting aligned activities through facilitation and project management, establishing shared measurement practices to evaluate the initiatives efforts, cultivating engagement and ownership of the work, supporting policy agendas that impact the larger system, and developing resources that support the initiatives' sustainability (Collective Impact Forum & FSG, 2017).
- Working Groups are formed around specific elements of the common agenda. They bring together partners from across the system to define priorities, develop strategies, and implement actions aligned with the common agenda. Each group is led by two to three co-chairs, ideally including at least one who serves on the

Steering Committee to maintain a strong connection. Co-chairs are responsible for contributing to the development of the meeting agenda and its content, facilitating discussions and decision-making, managing member engagement, nurturing relationships, cultivating a focus on equity, and serving as a bridge between the initiative and the community (Uribe et al., 2017).

Figure 2

The Collective Impact Structure



Note. From *How to Lead Collective Impact Working Groups* (p. 2), by D. Uribe, C. Wendel, and V. Bockstette, 2017, FSG.

Community of Practice

A Community of Practice (CoP) brings together stakeholders who face similar challenges or share a common concern, enabling them to learn collaboratively, share knowledge, and develop practical solutions in their field (Cambridge et al., 2005). A CoP consists of three defining characteristics:

1. Domain: A shared focus area that defines the group's purpose. It establishes common ground and a collective commitment, uniting individuals with relevant competencies and experience. One key goal is to create new knowledge and explore innovative solutions within the domain (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

2. Community: Members build relationships through shared activities and discussions that foster learning, information exchange, and mutual support. Collaborative learning depends on sustained interaction, trust, and respect among members (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).
3. Practice: The group members put ideas into action by developing a shared repertoire of resources, such as experiences, stories, tools, and approaches for addressing recurring challenges. These resources evolve over time through continual interaction and become part of the community's collective practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Small-group projects are one way to generate these resources while strengthening relationships among members (Cambridge et al., 2005).

The Community of Practice Structure

The Community of Practice model recognizes that members' capacity and availability fluctuate over time. As a result, participation is intentionally flexible, allowing individuals to move among different levels of engagement based on their interests, responsibilities, and availability. This fluidity encourages a continuous influx of fresh perspectives while recognizing that even peripheral members both gain and contribute value to the community (NNPHI & The Institute for Public Health Innovation, 2020). Levels of participation may include:

- Core: The foundational leadership team responsible for creating and revising a work plan, managing operations, and executing deliverables.
- Active: Regular contributors engaged in ongoing discussions and activities.
- Occasional: Members who engage with the group irregularly or on a limited basis based on schedule availability or topic relevance.
- Peripheral: Passive participants who rarely participate in discussions and activities. They may be newcomers, those with a casual interest, or those with limited time to engage.

Despite its flexible participation model, a CoP is well-structured and typically relies on formal governance mechanisms. A Charter serves as the foundational document that defines the CoP and its operations. This document includes a background and rationale, a mission statement, values, participation criteria or expectations (if defined), member benefits, and rules of engagement. The CoP should also have a Workplan that establishes clear goals and objectives, action steps or deliverables, and defined

measures for monitoring progress (NNPHI & The Institute for Public Health Innovation, 2020).

To build visibility and alignment, a CoP may establish a strong brand identity, including a logo, a tagline, and consistent messaging. In addition, a formal launch initiative may be utilized to garner people's attention and generate interest (NNPHI & The Institute for Public Health Innovation, 2020). While roles and responsibilities are tailored to the unique needs of each initiative, Table 3 represents an example from the National Network of Public Health Institutes.

Table 3

CoP Sample Roles and Responsibilities

Position	Description	Recommended Staffing
Manager or Administrator	Overseeing recruitment and engagement efforts, ensuring projects are on track, coordinating events and activities, managing design and branding, etc.	Compensated staff
Coordinator or Program Assistant	Reporting on performance metrics and managing the community's logistical and technical aspects.	Compensated staff
Facilitator or Moderator	Individuals or groups with subject matter expertise that can facilitate or moderate discussions, panels, webinars, or other CoP activities. They can also play an important role in recruiting members and managing or developing resources.	Determined by time expectations
Specialist	These individuals usually have a specific, narrowly defined role in supporting the CoP. Examples may include instructional design, communication, or technical support.	Services are contracted or donated in-kind
Leadership or Executive Team	A group (such as a Board, Advisory Group, or Steering Committee) responsible for general governance and leadership. This group should have regular check-ins on activities, plan evaluations, and monitor progress of the strategic plan. Facilitators/Moderators or specialists may serve on this team.	Voluntary

Note. Adapted from *Developing Public Health Communities of Practice* (p.9), by The National Network of Public Health Institutes (NNPHI) & The Institute for Public Health Innovation, 2020.

Application of Collaboration Frameworks

Table 4 summarizes the key characteristics of each framework and provides general guidance on when each may be most appropriate to use. These use cases are foundational examples rather than definitive, as there is significant overlap in how and when these models can be applied. Collaborative groups may choose to adapt, combine, or tailor elements from multiple frameworks to meet their unique goals, context, and needs.

Table 4

Comparison of Collaboration Frameworks

Collaboration Framework	Core Purpose	Time/Resource Commitment	Use Cases
Sociocracy	A consent-based governance system that distributes decision-making across interconnected, self-managing groups.	Moderate: Requires investment to establish governance structures, roles, decision-making practices, and ongoing adaptation.	• To encourage safe experimentation • To prevent decision-making gridlocks • To decentralize leadership
Collective Impact	A cross-sector approach that aligns stakeholders around a shared agenda to achieve systems-level change.	High: requires sustained coordination, stakeholder engagement, shared measurement systems, and infrastructure.	• To address large-scale social issues • To unify fragment sectors around a common agenda • To drive systemic innovation where traditional methods have fallen short
Community of Practice	A collaborative network focused on social learning, information exchange, and building a shared repertoire of resources.	Low to Moderate: requires ongoing participation, facilitation, and opportunities for knowledge sharing, but can often be integrated into existing networks and work structures.	• To share best practices for stakeholders facing similar challenges • To break down silos and encourage peer learning • To build collective expertise and innovation within a field

VI. Innovation and Action Methods

Beyond governance and collaboration frameworks, collaborative groups benefit from structured approaches to spark innovation, build alignment, and drive progress. This section outlines two approaches to ideation and execution: Appreciative Inquiry and Strategic Doing. Though each method can function independently to guide a group, collaborative groups may consider using them together or combining key aspects to meet their unique needs.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is a change management approach that focuses on strengths, opportunities, and possibilities rather than problems or barriers. The process is cyclical and encourages ongoing exploration of innovative ideas that foster learning and growth. Appreciative Inquiry engagements are typically structured using the 5-D process (The Center for Appreciative Inquiry, n.d.).

1. Define the overall focus of the inquiry. Include the project's purpose, content, and what needs to be achieved.
2. Discover ways of finding what works. Inquire about success, strengths, and experiences.
3. Dream up inspiring images of a desired future. Use past achievements and successes identified in the discovery phase to imagine new possibilities.
4. Design innovative ways to create an ideal future. Bring together stories and lessons from the discovery phase and creativity of the dream phase to determine what the ideal future should be.
5. Destiny, identify how the design will be delivered. Implement the plan and make changes as needed.

Generative Questions

Generative questions are used throughout this process to encourage reflection, uncover strengths, and inspire possibilities for the future (The Center for Appreciative Inquiry, n.d.). A typical appreciative interview guide consists of three standard question topics: past experiences, present values, and future wishes. Examples of generic questions include:

Best Experience: Learn from positive lived experiences.

- Describe a time when things worked really well. What were the conditions that made it possible? Who was doing what? What did you do (Alpuim & Ehrenberg, 2023)?

Values: Identify what has meaning and value to you in the present.

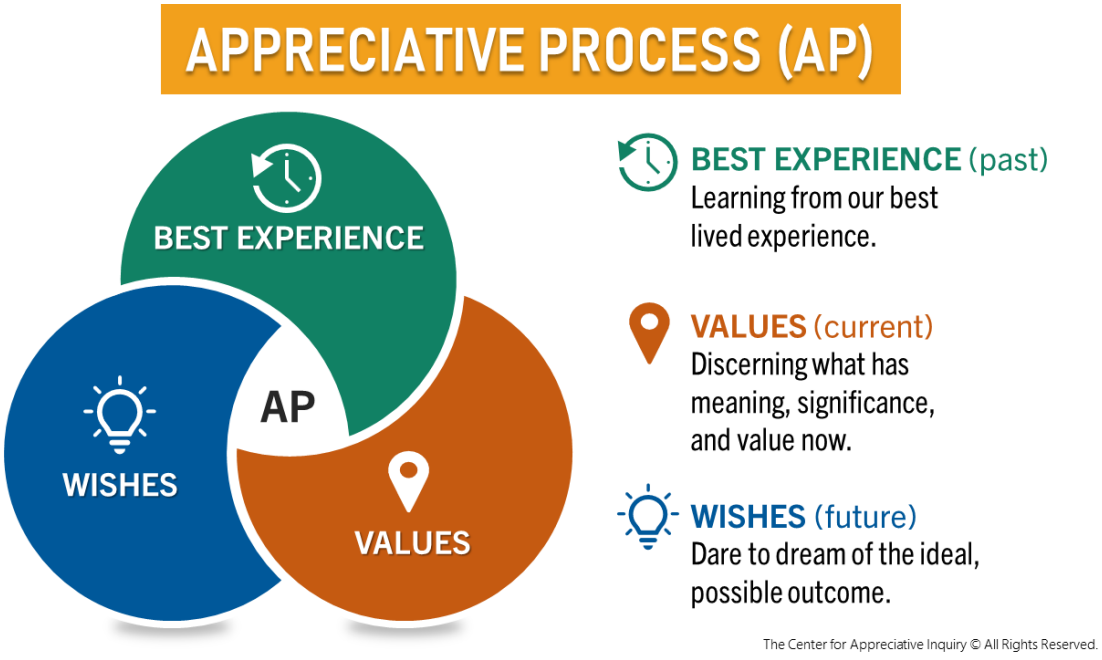
- What things do you value about yourself, your work, and your organization? What do you value most about the story you shared in the previous question (The Center for Appreciative Inquiry, n.d.)?

Wishes: Dream of the ideal, possible outcome.

- What are your wishes for the future? For yourself, your work, your organization (The Center for Appreciative Inquiry, n.d.)?

Figure 3

Appreciative Inquiry Process



Note. From *What Is Appreciative Inquiry (AI)*, by The Center for Appreciative Inquiry, n.d., https://centerforappreciativeinquiry.net/resources/what-is-appreciative-inquiry-ai/

Strategic Doing

Strategic Doing is a collaborative action framework that supports groups in choosing a clear direction, taking small, meaningful actions, and learning and adapting as they go to solve complex problems (Strategic Doing Institute, n.d.). This approach emphasizes safe conversation spaces, learning by doing, and shared responsibility. Strategic Doing

consists of four questions and 10 rules to guide collaboration, as follows (Agile Strategy Lab, n.d.):

Before you begin.

1. Create a safe space where members feel comfortable sharing ideas, testing assumptions, and exploring new possibilities without fear of criticism.
2. Frame the conversation around an appreciative question, which focuses on strengths, opportunities, and assets rather than problems or deficiencies.

What could we do?

3. Uncover hidden assets that people are willing to share, such as a connection, skill, or experience that can support paths forward.
4. Link and leverage assets by narrowing down ideas to map strengths and resources into a list of opportunities for potential action.

What should we do?

5. Rank all potential opportunities to find the "Big Easy" (i.e., the initiative that offers the highest potential impact with the lowest barriers to implementation). Rate each opportunity on a 1-to-5 scale across two dimensions: Impact (1 = low impact, 5 = high impact) and ease of execution (1 = difficult, 5 = easy). Scores are added together, and the highest cumulative score emerges as the "Big Easy."
6. Convert the "Big Easy" into a strategic outcome with measurable characteristics. Identify goals and objectives and articulate what success looks like for this opportunity.

What will we do?

7. Define a pathfinder project with guideposts. A pathfinder project is a small-scale initiative designed to test feasibility and generate learning. Effective pathfinder projects include clear milestones, can typically be completed within three to six months, engage stakeholders, test key assumptions, and provide a basis for determining whether broader implementation is warranted.
8. Create a short-term action plan in which everyone takes a small step. This includes what each group member will do in the next 30 days to move the project forward.

What's the 30/30?

9. Set a 30/30 meeting to review progress and make adjustments. The session should focus on what has been done in the last 30 days and what needs to happen in the next 30 days. Each meeting should be treated as a strategic checkpoint, where the group evaluates key insights, addresses gaps, and adjusts the project plan to stay aligned with the goals and objectives.
10. Nudge, connect, and promote relentlessly to build new habits of collaboration. Leaders should continuously encourage collaboration, send reminders, share progress updates, and celebrate small wins to maintain momentum.

VII. Evaluating Collaborative Initiatives

Evaluating collaborative initiatives is essential for determining their effectiveness and ability to achieve meaningful outcomes. Continuous assessment enables groups to leverage their strengths, identify weaknesses, and recognize where adjustments are needed to improve working together (Marek et al., 2015). Evaluation approaches may vary depending on the strategies and frameworks in place. The following sections outline examples of evaluation tools that can be adapted to meet the needs of a collaborative group.

The Collaboration Assessment Tool (CAT)

The Collaboration Assessment Tool (CAT) is a validated instrument that can be used as either an informal inventory or a formal evaluation to assess the functioning of collaborative initiatives (Marek et al., 2015). Its reliability and validity were established through testing with 77 coalitions comprising 456 organizations across the United States, including 111 Human service agencies and organizations (Marek et al., 2015).

The CAT is a survey consisting of 67 items designed to measure seven key factors associated with collaborative success: Context, Members, Process and Organization, Communication, Function, Resources, and Leadership. For each item, members of the collaboration rate their level of agreement on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (Marek et al., 2015). The full list of survey items is included in the Appendix.

This tool is flexible and can be used in multiple ways, including:

- One-Time Assessment: A standalone evaluation of collaborative functioning to identify strengths and address gaps.
- Process evaluation: Serving as part of a process evaluation to understand the context and implementation of projects conducted through collaborative efforts.

- Longitudinal Tracking: Evaluating change over time as the collaboration group matures from its formative phase, to the developmental phase, and then to the implementation phase.

Once collected, findings should be shared with group members to guide discussion, learning, and strategic planning (Marek et al., 2015).

The Value Creation Framework

The Value Creation Framework assesses the impact of social learning and collaboration within Communities of Practice (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2011). It combines quantitative indicators with qualitative value-creation stories to capture both measurable outcomes and the experiences that contribute to them. By integrating multiple stakeholder perspectives, the framework provides a more comprehensive understanding of impact than metrics alone (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2011).

The Value Creation Framework distinguishes between five cycles of value creation, detailed below. Additional indicators, data sources, and instructions on capturing value-creation stories can be found in the guide, Promoting and Assessing Value Creation (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2011).

Cycle 1. Immediate Value: Activities and Interactions

This cycle focuses on the immediate benefits generated through participation and interaction.

- Examples of Value: New connections, information sharing, assistance with challenges, exposure to new perspectives.
- How to measure (Indicators and Data): Track levels of participation, engagement, networking, and quality of interactions through meeting attendance records, feedback forms, and review of meeting notes documenting connections and substantive discussions.

Cycle 2. Potential Value: Knowledge Capital

Participation can create knowledge value that is not realized immediately. For example, hearing a person's story can help others know what to do when faced with similar challenges.

- Examples of Value: New skills, increased confidence, trust, inspiration, collaboration opportunities, and organizational reputation.
- How to measure (Indicators and Data): Gauge skills acquired, changes in perspective, confidence, trust, documentation, and new approaches to learning

through self-reports, interviews, surveys, meeting summaries, and expressions of interest in continued learning.

Cycle 3. Applied Value: Changes in Practice

Applied value occurs when knowledge gained through participation influences practice. Adapting or applying knowledge capital in different situations can lead to changes or innovations in actions, decision-making, practices, tools, approaches, or systems.

- Examples of Value: Adoption of new tools, implementation of advice or innovations, and new partnerships.
- How to measure (Indicators and Data): Evaluate the adoption of new tools, implementation of advice, innovations in practice, and new collaborative arrangements through self-reports and stories describing changes in perspectives or practice.

Cycle 4. Realized Value: Performance Improvement

Realized value reflects measurable improvements in performance resulting from changes in practice. To measure this, it is important to identify performance metrics related to the collaboration's potential contributions. Performance may already be measured, in which case there is a baseline to compare the effects of the collaboration.

- Examples of Value: Improved service delivery, increased efficiency, stronger outcomes, and enhanced organizational reputation within the Community of Practice.
- How to measure (Indicators and Data): Measure individual and organizational performance, service quality, and reputation through partner feedback, project assessments, and performance indicators.

Cycle 5. Reframing Value: Redefining Success

Reframing value occurs when assumptions about success, effectiveness, or best practice evolve. This can happen on an individual, collective, or organizational level. There may even be a change in the system to support these practices.

- Examples of Value: New policies, revised frameworks, evolving norms, shifts in stakeholder expectations.
- How to measure (Indicators and Data): Assess shifts in community aspirations, stakeholder relationships, and institutional practices through evidence of new visions, evolving expectations, engagement of new stakeholders, and strategic shifts that reflect a new understanding.

The Collective Impact Model of Evaluation

The Collective Impact Evaluation approach emphasizes continuous learning. This includes learning how to communicate and collaborate effectively, establish shared goals, assess progress, and use data to inform decision-making. Over time, the group learns how to build momentum, influence behaviors and systems, and ultimately address complex problems more effectively (Preskill et al., 2014). The evaluation is designed to support and strengthen this ongoing learning process.

This model evaluates both the implementation of an initiative and its long-term outcomes. As the initiative evolves, evaluation activities shift from a developmental focus on initial implementation to a formative focus on systems and behavior change, and ultimately to a summative focus on overall impact (Preskill et al., 2014). Table 5 below outlines these evaluation phases. Detailed indicators, methods, and case studies can be found in The Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact.

Table 5

Phases of Collective Impact Evaluation

Type of Evaluation	Time Period	Key Question	Key Data Sources
Developmental	Begins during the early years and continues throughout the initiative.	What needs to happen to effectively implement the initiative?	Early performance indicators, including data on the initiative's implementation.
Formative	Begins during the middle years and continues throughout the initiative.	How well is the initiative working?	Shared measurement system that includes data on leading indicators of systems and behavior changes.
Summative	Begins during the later years and continues throughout the initiative.	What difference did the initiative make?	Shared measurement system that includes population-level outcomes and indicators.

Note. Adapted from *What Does the Literature Say About the Effectiveness of Interorganizational Collaboration?* (p. 6), by H. Moore and J. Lammert, 2017, Center to Improve Program and Project Performance.

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Appendix

The Collaboration Assessment Tool Factors and Items

Note: Throughout this appendix, the term "coalition" refers to individuals and agencies working collaboratively.

For each item below, members of the collaboration rate their level of agreement on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (Marek et al., 2015).

Context

1. The agency/organization that I represent in this coalition has a history of collaborating with other local agencies/organizations in my county.
2. Participating agencies/organizations represented within this coalition encourage and support the activities of this coalition.
3. Members of our coalition represent the cultural diversity of our community.
4. Community members are aware of this coalition.
5. Community members view this coalition as a leader in relation to the coalition's goals and activities.
6. Political leaders in our community support the mission of this coalition.
7. Key community leaders in our community support the mission of this coalition.
8. Community members support the mission of this coalition.
9. Key stakeholders are members of this coalition.
10. Policies, laws, requirements, or regulations that support the efforts of this coalition are in place.

Members

1. Coalition members share an understanding and respect for each other.
2. Coalition members share an understanding and respect for the various organizations represented within this coalition.
3. Coalition members trust one another.
4. Coalition members are willing to compromise [recognizing that many decisions cannot fit the preferences of every member perfectly].
5. Coalition members believe the benefits of the collaboration will offset costs (e.g., such as loss of autonomy and turf issues).
6. Coalition members agree that a comprehensive response is needed to address the goals and objectives of this coalition.
7. Coalition members understand the roles, rights, and responsibilities of all participating members.

8. Coalition members bring unique skills to address this coalition's needs.
9. Coalition members and the agencies they represent are willing to distribute power in a manner that is in the coalition's best interest.
10. Coalition members feel ownership in the way the group works.
11. Coalition members feel ownership in the results/products of their work.
12. Coalition members and their respective agencies/organizations share credit for coalition successes.

Process

1. This coalition is as adaptable as necessary in meeting the needs of a changing community.
2. This coalition meets on a regular basis.
3. All coalition members participate in decision-making.
4. Strategies to carry out the goals and objectives of this coalition are clearly articulated.
5. Coalition members select or are assigned roles and responsibilities according to their interests and strengths.
6. There is a system in place for resolving conflicts between the demands of partnering agencies and demands of this coalition.
7. This coalition has an established system to regularly assess community needs and resources.
8. There is a system in place by which progress toward goal attainment is measured.
9. This coalition markets its efforts and accomplishments to the community to obtain support.

Communication

1. A system of communication is in place for coalition members to discuss their efforts.
2. Coalition members frequently communicate formally (e.g., meetings, trainings, and interagency work groups).
3. Coalition members frequently communicate informally (e.g., memos, e-mail, phone, and social contact).
4. Coalition members' communication is adequate (in frequency) to effectively work towards meeting the coalition's goals and objectives.
5. Members of this coalition interact to discuss issues openly.
6. This coalition provides a safe environment in which disagreements and conflicts between members can be discussed.

7. Communication among coalition members is effective (promotes understanding, cooperation, and transfer of information).
8. This coalition has established communication channels with local community leaders.
9. This coalition has established communication channels with the broader community.

Function

1. This coalition has clearly defined the problem that it wishes to address.
2. The goals and objectives of this coalition are based upon key community needs.
3. This coalition has clearly defined short term goals and objectives.
4. This coalition has clearly defined long term goals and objectives.
5. Members agree upon the goals and objectives for this coalition.
6. The goals and objectives set for this coalition can be realistically attained.
7. Members view themselves as interdependent in achieving the goals and objectives of this coalition.
8. The goals and objectives of this coalition differ, at least in part, from each of the partner organizations.

Resources

1. There is adequate financial support to maintain coalition operations.
2. There is adequate in-kind support to maintain coalition operations.
3. There are plans in place to secure future funding for coalition operations.
4. There are sufficient funds to sustain coalition operations for the next two years.
5. Agencies/organizations represented in this coalition provide resources to support the coalition operations.
6. Coalition members seek outside sources of financial and in-kind support for coalition operations.
7. Coalition members recruit additional partners that can offer financial and in-kind support for coalition operations.
8. The professional expertise, skills, and specialization of coalition members have been identified and are used to advance the goals of the coalition.
9. Resources within our community (e.g., clerical assistance, time, and financial support) have been identified and are used to advance the goals of this coalition.
10. Our coalition utilizes the cultural assets of our community.

Leadership

1. The coalition leader(s) has strong organizational skills.

2. The coalition leader(s) has strong interpersonal skills.
3. The coalition leader(s) supports and facilitates team building.
4. The coalition leader(s) utilizes members' skills and strengths to meet coalition goals and objectives.
5. The coalition leader(s) carries out the role with fairness.
6. The coalition leader(s) maintains a focus on the goals and objectives of the coalition.
7. The coalition leader(s) supports members in carrying out their roles and responsibilities.
8. The coalition leader(s) has knowledge of potential funding sources and plans for future funding.
9. The coalition leader(s) is effective.

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