

A Synthesis of Research on Organizational Collaboration

Collaboration and cooperation, distinctly different operational processes, are both valued models, but each serves a unique purpose and yields a different return.

While there is little argument about the need for or value of collaboration—whether among agencies, institutions, or educational institutions—there is disagreement about what “counts” as collaboration. For the past decade, researchers have attempted to distinguish between collaboration and cooperation. The New England Program in Teacher Education (1973) offers these two definitions:

Cooperation—two individuals or organizations reach some mutual agreement, but their work together does not progress beyond this level.

Collaboration—development of the model of joint planning, joint implementation, and joint evaluation between individuals or organizations.

Hoyt (1978) suggests the following:

Collaboration is a term that implies the parties involved share responsibility and authority for basic policy decision making. . . .

Cooperation, on the other hand, is a term that assumes two or more parties, each with separate and autonomous programs, agree to work together in making all such programs more successful.

Distinguishing between collaboration and cooperation provides a useful structure for exploring the literature

and for arriving at a stronger delineation of the terms and a richer understanding of the consequences of each process. Involving either individuals or organizations, collaboration and cooperation are distinctly different operational processes. They are both valued models, each serving a unique purpose. Each requires different kinds of input, and each yields a different return (Hord 1980a).

In exploring the literature on collaborative and cooperative efforts, I examined concepts and paradigms of individual, organizational, and interorganizational behavior to gain a scholarly perspective on individuals and groups working together. To understand the practitioner's point of view, I also studied reports of agencies and institutions that “cooperated,” “coordinated,” “collaborated,” or “consorted.”

Concepts of Interrelationships

Basic to the study of organizations and their activities is the study of the individuals who make up the group. Individuals are:

...joined together in groups, small and large, and they interact in these groups both as individuals and as groups. . . an

individual cannot exist in isolation, but only in relation to other individuals and groups (Miller and Rice 1967, p. 14).

Thus, a theory of human behavior is a requisite for a theory of organization. Miller and Rice further suggest that “individuals and groups, however, have the capacity to mobilize themselves at different times into many different kinds of activity systems. . . .” (p. 14). Therefore, it would seem that the discrete consideration of individuals within the relating organizations, with pertinent attention to all individuals and their capacity to “mobilize” themselves into action, is an important corollary to assessing a group's capability for movement.

Apley and Winder (1977) define collaboration as a relational system of individuals within groups, in which:

1. individuals in a group share mutual aspirations and a common conceptual framework;
2. the interactions among individuals are characterized by “justice as fairness”;
3. these aspirations and conceptualizations are characterized by each individual's *consciousness* of his or her motives toward the other; by *caring* or concern for the other; and by *commitment* to work with the other over time provided that this commitment is a matter of *choice* (p. 281).

Fox and Faver (1984) identify four benefits that scientists perceived in working in collaboration with other scholars: joining resources and dividing labor, alleviating academic isolation, sustaining motivation through commitments to the other collaborator, and creating energy through the interpersonal relationship to complete projects. They organize the costs of collaboration into two categories. *Process costs* consist of time for negotiation and exchange; various expenses of telephone, mail, and travel; and the personal investment necessary to sustain the collaboration. *Outcome costs* include possible delays, evaluation problems and allocation of project credit, and possible quality loss. The positive consequences of collaboration meant increased project size and scientific research efficiency, generating a "collective creativity." Negatively, collaboration could inhibit individual creativity, hinder the verification of study findings, threaten the research monitoring system by peers, and increase the opportunities for fraud.

Hannay and Stevens (1984) specify important aspects that contributed to their collaboration. First, both education researchers were actively and equally involved, with no partner taking a dominant role. Second, coming from a different role and perspective, each appreciated the role and perspective of the other. Both formulated the research questions and made decisions and analyses, leading to a mutual enterprise. Hannay and Stevens state further that each was willing to contribute time and "bracket their respective egos" (p. 3) and observe that "both parties must seriously and mutually reflect on how the collaborative nature of the project will be accomplished" (p. 13). These initial conditions, they maintain, are required for collaboration to occur.

In examining groups linked in mutual endeavor, Van de Ven (1976) defines an interorganizational relationship (IR) as occurring:

...when two or more organizations transact resources among each other.... An IR is defined as a social action system on the premise that it exhibits the basic

elements of any organized form of collective behavior (p. 28).

Schermerhorn (1975) notes the growing literature of interorganizational analysis and, on the basis of a review of the literature, suggests motivators that influence interorganizational cooperation.

Organizations will seek out or be receptive to interorganizational cooperation when faced with situations of resource scarcity or performance distress...[or] when a powerful extraorganizational force demands this activity (p. 848).

Schermerhorn summarizes the potential costs to organizations for these cooperative relationships: loss of decision-making autonomy, unfavorable ramifications for organizational image or identity, or costs requiring the direct expenditure of scarce organizational resources. Beckhard (1975) maintains that institutional change (to more cooperative or collaborative modes) will not result unless the following conditions are present.

1. There must be real dissatisfaction with the status quo, a high enough level of dissatisfaction to mobilize energy toward some change.
2. There must be in the organizational leaders' "heads" some picture of a desired state which would be worth mobilizing appropriate energy.
3. There must be in the organizational leaders' "heads" a knowledge and picture of some *practical* first steps toward this desired state, if energy is to be mobilized to start (p. 424).

Organizations use "cooperative strategies" to manage their interdependence with other organizations. Thompson (1967) describes three types of strategies organizations might use. A *contracting* strategy denotes informal consensus and more formal or negotiated agreements for the future exchange of performances. *Coopting* is "the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure" (p. 35) so as to increase its stability, a more constraining kind of cooperation than contracting. The third form of cooperation is *coalescing*, which is the engagement of two or more organizations in a joint venture to reach goals. It provides a basis for exchange and subsumes a commitment for future

decisions made jointly, an even more constraining form of cooperation than coopting.

Institutional/Organizational Relationships

A burgeoning body of literature is emanating from the field of education as institutions and agencies engage in working relationships in a variety of modes and for various purposes. Intriligator (1982) suggests that regional education agencies can best accomplish school improvement in cooperative arrangements with other educational organizations. In discussing these arrangements, Intriligator (1983) notes that interorganizational relationships may be interchangeably called collaboratives, cooperatives, coalitions, and consortia and that they occur when "two or more independent organizations agree to pool their authority, resources, and energies in order to achieve a goal or goals they desire" (p. 5).

Intriligator (1982) created an analytical framework for considering the effectiveness of interorganizational relations. He divides effectiveness indicators into four groups: (1) prior organizational situations including potential resources, a cooperative environment, and goal congruence between members and the interorgan-

"A greater amount of time is required for collaboration than for cooperation, since activities are shared rather than allowed."

ization; (2) structural characteristics that involve coordinating mechanisms, demographic conditions, and contributions of resources; (3) relational characteristics that support the involvement of individuals in multiple complex organizational ties; and (4) process characteristics such as the amount of formality, the process of exchange, and patterns of influence and authority or power.

Other reports come from the experiences of institutions of higher education working with public schools for a mutual objective. Metzner (1970) states that, in the past, university and school joint ventures failed because of differing aims and objectives. He suggests possible solutions for improving the prospects for joint endeavors. For example, because the principal is identified as the key individual in joint school-university relations, selection of the principal should be on the basis of his or her understanding of the university's orientation. Furthermore, school faculty selection for the joint endeavor should be focused on change-oriented teachers. A third consideration is the continual involvement of the administration, school faculty, and university personnel in all stages of planning, evaluation, and decision making.

Howey and Cannon (1978) investigated institutional relationships and focused on the structure (number of persons from each institution) and process (how much each person talked, asked questions, made statements of collaboration in decision making). Their conclusions reiterate the desirability of parity for each institution's representatives. Several factors contribute to process parity: group process training, experience by council members in collaborative decision making, and an active role in meetings by the team manager.

The North Carolina Quality Assurance Program is a collaborative effort of institutions of higher education and local public schools. Schaffer and Bryant (1983) report on the program's definition of collaboration: "shared decision-making in governance, planning, delivery, and evaluation of programs. It is a pluralistic form of education where people of dissimilar backgrounds work together with equal status. It may be seen as working *with* rather than working *on* a person" (p. 3). Benefits of and impediments to collaboration were identified through

the project's review of the literature. The use of both parties' strengths results in economic savings to both, enhanced project outcomes, and improved communication. Impediments include: lack of resources and the limitations of organizations in transferring resources and power; external institutional decision-making processes and lack of skills for cooperative decision making; incompatible structures of organizations; lack of concepts for organizing the parties; and poor matches between what one party can offer and what the other needs.

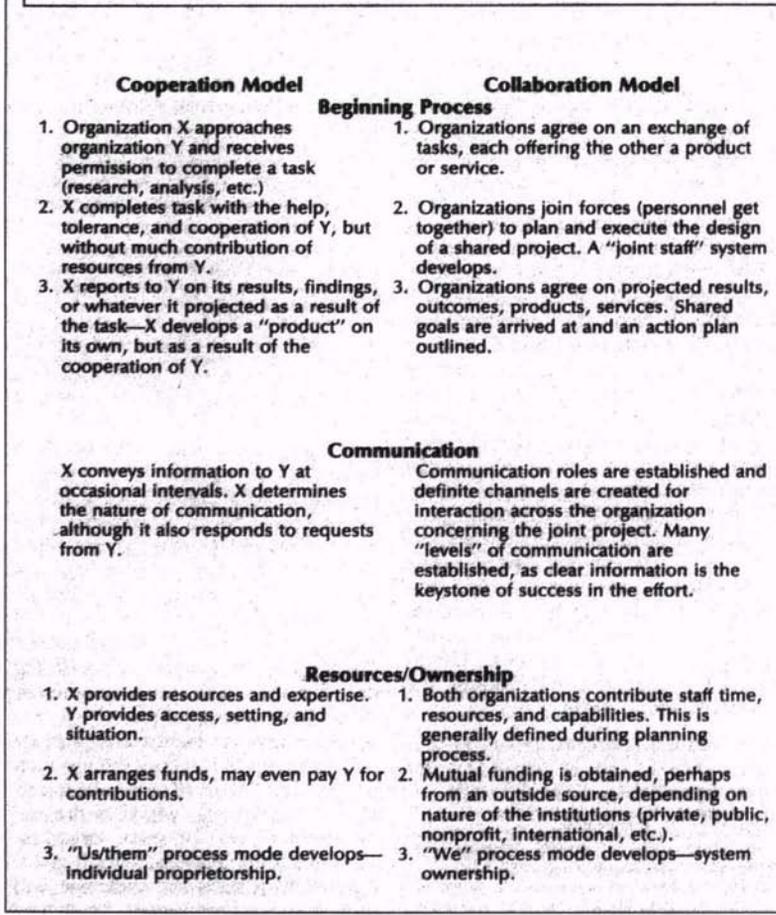
Program participants identify the benefits of collaboration as communication, sharing of resources, consensus on educational goals, and practical aspects of teacher education. They cite

impediments as lack of time and financial support and the overburdening of agencies from planning, implementing, and evaluating the collaboration. Collaboration appears to have something for everybody, but it is difficult to achieve. Schaffer and Bryant suggest that "collaboration is necessary and valuable, but that it occurs only in special settings or in unusual circumstances" (p. 6).

Additional Ideas

Lanier (1979) uses the metaphor of the family to describe the distinction between cooperation and collaboration. A mother *cooperates* with her son by allowing and encouraging his rock band to practice in their home; the son

Fig. 1. Models of Cooperation and Collaboration



cooperates with the mother by preparing hors d'oeuvres for the mother's guests. These effects are cooperative; the activities are mutually agreeable but not for mutual benefit. The family *collaborates* in preparing a family meal; they each "offer some form of expertise that is rewarding to all ... [which] contributes to the well-being of the whole group" (p. 408).

Houston (1979) reports that "the paucity of research on collaboration is astounding. The literature is filled with case studies and observations... [describing] conditions, designs, and dreams" (p. 333), and cites the need for research that would address such complex aspects of collaboration as the structure of collaborative enterprises (organization, governance,

management structure), problems of communication at all levels within and between institutions, and support and reward systems for the individuals involved in the group effort.

Further, Houston offers hypotheses derived from the literature, from his own experience, and from common "lore."

- Collaborative relationships are more likely to grow from successful previous experiences.

- Goals that are clear and mutually held will aid collaboration.

- Achieving short-term goals will encourage a positive view and encourage progress.

- Assumptions and decisions in a collaboration seem to come out of personal experience.

Such hypotheses need testing. Clearly, there is a lack of research and a need for studies that would provide insight and shed light on this relationship.

Developing Models of Organizational Collaboration and Cooperation

The attractive ideals of collaboration do not necessarily translate into clear action among participants. However, I have further refined my ten-point definition (see sidebar) into preliminary models for explicating the processes of cooperation and collaboration (Fig. 1). This comparison is a provocative beginning that warrants more attention to both application and research.

One can see at a glance the vastly different expectations each process evokes. One can also immediately construe what conflicts would arise when it is not clear *which* model is in process—when some individuals are involved in cooperation, and others are expecting collaboration. Obviously, which one is to be used must be made clear from the beginning, and everyone must know the definitions and expectations of the selected model.

The necessity for clarifying expectations of the participants is of paramount importance—not only the expectations of rewards, but expectations of goals, of commitments from each sector, and of procedures. These decision points frequently become the critical dilemmas that force a choice of the cooperative mode rather than the more demanding collaborative one.

A great deal of additional inquiry, elaboration, and refinement is necessary. Research is needed that undertakes comparative studies of the various ways of interrelating: cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and so on. With a further delineation of the components of each process, including an explication of the costs and benefits of each, perhaps we would learn the requirements of each method, the limitations, and the effectiveness of each type under specific circumstances. □

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Requirements/Characteristics

1. X identifies a problem area and obtains permission from Y to research and/or analyze it; or an area of interest of X is found to be profited by some association with Y, and permission from Y is obtained to carry out that association.

1. Both organizations expend much time and energy.
2. Both groups take action and risks.
3. Frequent meetings, large and small, are arranged.
4. Compromise is a necessity; various trade-offs are arranged.
5. A combined staff, perhaps even a staff trade or loan, comes into being.
6. Expertise of different kinds is contributed by each group (which is one of the primary motivations for collaborations).

Leadership/Control

1. Unilateral leadership is characteristic.
2. Central control continues in each organization.

1. Dispersed leadership is characteristic.
2. Responsibility is delegated. Individuals must be willing to use independent judgment about assuming responsibility.
3. Shared, mutual control is ideal. Shared goals provide the congruity to the effort.

Rewards

1. X gets its product. Y may be able to use it, or Y may simply benefit from a sense of altruism or social contribution.

1. Both organizations are able to share in a product or service that would not have been possible (or very researchable) as separate agents.
2. This shared product/service may be a release of a responsibility that neither one could have carried alone.
3. In the case of public service organizations, the public may gain greater benefit from the joint effort than each separate organization could have offered.
4. The product of the joint endeavor can sometimes lead to a permanent relationship, opening the way for further sharing and mutual benefits.
5. Each organization can experience an expansion of possibilities without having to "spread thin."
6. Although more time, energy, and resources may have been expended, very often the same time, energy, and resources are ultimately conserved by shared effort. Duplication of services is sometimes eliminated while improving the quality of service.

Contrasting Organizational Collaboration and Cooperation

Drawing from the literature, my own personal experience, and common sense, I identified and contrasted salient features of the complex collaborative process with the apparently more simple cooperative process. Obviously, these points leave ample room for further definition and conclusions. Although the ten features are part of either process, I describe them here in terms of the demands of collaboration, since collaboration is highly recommended as the most appropriate mode for interorganizational relationships.

1. **Needs and interests.** The extent to which organizations share interests and needs before joining is a major determinant of their propensity to work together. There must be a sense of gain for each. When gain is mutual and interest is sufficiently heightened, collaboration is possible.

2. **Time.** The necessary time must be devoted to joint endeavors. A greater amount of time is required for collaboration than for cooperation, since activities are shared rather than allowed. Participants engage in many mutual activities; unilateral action, which is efficient in terms of time, is not effective for collaborative efforts.

3. **Energy.** Collaboration requires effort. Reaching-out, action-taking individuals are needed to initiate and sustain the collaborative spirit. These kinds of people should be given key roles in the interchange to maintain a bonding.

4. **Communication.** Large- and small-group meetings are a continuing requirement. Frequent interactions at all levels across both organizations are a necessity. The collaborating mode is a sharing one, and sharing is grounded in continuing communication.

5. **Resources.** Collaborating organizations share funds, staff, and other resources. The rewards, or expected outcomes, must be worth the investment to each participant.

6. **Organizational factors.** While the organizations are the framework, the people within them do the actual work. Collaborating individuals within an organization promote similar activities between organizations.

7. **Control.** When participants are willing to relinquish personal control and assume more risk, they create a more flexible environment and can move closer to collaboration. Control must be shared, and a tolerance for plasticity must be fostered. For people or organizations needing stability and specificity, collaboration is a difficult process—the cooperative model is more suitable.

8. **Perceptions.** Taking the pulse or checking the perceptions of others involved contributes to the collaborating climate. It is vital for individuals in each organization to be willing to view the world from the standpoint of others. This empathy enhances all the other points.

9. **Leadership.** Strong leaders who express an enthusiastic, positive example of collaborating on many levels encourage overall collaboration in the organizations.

10. **Personal traits.** "If there is any personality characteristic needed to function in the [collaborating] approach, it is probably simple patience" (Murray and Smith 1974). To that should be added persistence—and a willingness to share.

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