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.

Appley 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 interorganizational arrangement.
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 cooperatees with her son by allowing and encouraging his rock band to practice in their home; the son...
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.

References

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 organization.

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


Shirley M. Hord is co-program director, Research and Development Center for Teacher Education, The University of Texas, Austin, TX 78712.
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