

Design for Collaboration: Steps toward partnership.

Signal overlap? Duplicated services? Inefficient technology? Too many programs, not enough air? Shrinking federal funds? Virtually every challenge affecting public television points to a collaborative solution. That collaboration may be a merger, a joint venture, a strategic alliance, or simply a coordination of resources: in fact, the greatest challenge is not deciding to collaborate, but selecting the best form of collaboration, and implementing the partnership in a productive and mutually advantageous way.

What exactly is collaboration?

The term collaboration is a current buzzword in non profit circles -- and like many buzzwords, it is frequently misunderstood.

The goal of collaboration is to produce results that are more easily achieved by working together than by working alone. Collaboration can be as complex and invasive as a merger (the legal combining of two or more organizations; the absorption of one interest by another). Collaboration can be as transient and informal as the handshake agreement that seals a lunch date to explore common challenges. Partners can be internal or external to the organization or both. Regardless of the form, the process is the same: commitment to collaboration guides the participants to a focus on long-term results, instead of short-term accomplishments; building relationships, instead of competition, and involving diversity of stakeholders instead of working alone.

Designing the collaboration that works for you

Effective collaborations hit the ground running, troubleshoot conflicts before they turn toxic, communicate effectively with all parties, and produce measurable benefits to everyone involved. Following is a step by step process for creating collaborations that meet these criteria :

1. **Agree on the concept behind the collaboration.**
2. **Set the agenda for the collaboration and create the working group**
3. **Prepare the situation analysis.**
4. **Define the vision, mission, and strategies of the collaboration.**
5. **Define structure and processes to get results.**
6. **Communicate regularly with employees, funders, audiences, underwriters, members, and other stakeholders.**
7. **Implementation the Plan.**
8. **Ensure continued success.**

Following these eight steps is important because each represents an opportunity for participants to make key decisions about the collaboration. Skipping a step increases the risk of misunderstanding, duplication of effort, or a failure to consider all factors in making the best decision possible. There is tremendous variety among public television organizations: the needs of community stations, state networks, a national producer, a major market, or a university station whose signal stops at the outskirts of town are all very different. The simple fact is: one size does not fit all when it comes to designing effective collaborations. Following these eight steps can ensure that the specifics of the collaboration reflect participant needs.

Step 1: Agree on the concept behind the collaboration.

The process begins when one or more parties (the sponsors) decide that collaboration is desirable and progresses to involve more individuals and other parties as the need arises. These initial participants may not have the answers to all questions, but they are committed to exploring collaboration as a solution to their

challenges. Usually, the first step for these sponsors is to obtain preliminary approval from those in authority within their organizations by presenting a concept paper with a rough outline of the purpose and agenda for collaboration. Sometimes this outline takes the form of a Grant Application – like the Future Fund and Overlap Grants programs from CPB. Other times, the idea may originate internally; in this case, going forward means securing internal resources as well as gaining approval of the idea. With this authority, then it's time to set the agenda for collaboration.

Step 2: Set the Agenda for the collaboration and create the working group

The agenda is simply a broad statement of goals and possible areas of collaboration. Frequently, the sponsors engage an outside facilitator to help them explore the opportunity further and set an agenda for collaboration. This is particularly important if there is a history of competition, misunderstanding, suspicion, or some other type of ill will between the potential collaborators. Outside facilitation is also helpful to executives who have recently assumed a senior position in the organization and are in the process of building a leadership team.

As part of setting the agenda, the sponsors identify potential members of the collaboration – people who must be involved to ensure success and potential roles for these individuals. The sponsors must “sell their case” to other potential collaborators. As a group or individually, the collaborators must be given an opportunity to respond to this case by presenting their interests, concerns, and perceived opportunities of the collaboration. Through honest discussion, the group can begin to identify common and divergent interest, concerns, and opportunities. It is an equally important to determine directions the collaboration **should not** explore (the “agree to disagree’s”) to ensure the best use of participant and staff time. Time invested in agenda-setting is well spent if participants develop the positive relationships it takes to ensure long-term success.

Step 3. Prepare the situation analysis.

Once the relationships are in place, the working group's first job is to conduct a formal analysis to see if the collaboration can produce benefits and results that outweigh the

effort and resources. Similar to the Situation Analysis in a strategic plan, this deliverable includes a candid external and internal examination of the environmental and internal factors affecting the collaboration. Typical topics include:

Organizational goals – how this collaboration fits into the overall business context for every participant.

Organizational capabilities – a description of the current operating state for each participant.

Key challenge(s) – the problem(s) the collaboration will address.

Environmental factors – what is happening outside the organization that can affect the collaboration.

How these challenge(s) affect the participants – an overview of what's at stake for each participant in the collaboration, including benefits and disadvantages for all parties.

Structural issues – a preliminary view of the factors to be considered in structuring the collaboration, and possibly a rough draft structure (this may change as the process continues).

Financial implications – a cost/benefit analysis that provides guidance for resource allocation.

Sometimes a complete situation analysis reveals that a merger is the best solution for all involved parties. Even though a merger is more intensive, the processes of collaboration can be used to enhance the merger's effectiveness.

Step 4. Determine vision, mission, and strategies of the collaboration.

With the variety of challenges facing public broadcasting, there is no lack of potential agenda items: technological change from computerization to conversion to DTV; shifting expectations among funders; changes in political climate; the shifting demographics and needs of our audiences and members, to name a few.

Partners in any collaboration must begin with a clear and mutually agreed-upon statement of purpose – the overall mission of the collaboration. A fundamental goal of most collaborations is “do more with less.” However, this is too general to provide the level of focus required to move beyond the concept stage. Examples of this type include:

- Find ways to increase revenue or reduce costs through collaboration in pledge production and transmission.
- Improve internal and external customer service.
- Determine support sites for regional collaboration in digital conversion.

Whether the purpose can be broad and exploratory or specific and time sensitive, in almost every case, you can expect the goal statement to evolve as the collaboration itself evolves. But at every moment, each party to the collaboration should be able to answer the question: “Why are you doing this?” in twenty five words or less.

Step 5. Define structure and processes to get results.

Collaboration can take a wide variety of structures, ranging from internal to external, formal to informal, and legally incorporated structure to a virtual structure. (See Table 1) Here are a few examples within the public television environment.

Temporary Teams and Working Groups

To address a single specific issue, stations can develop a permanent or temporary team of individuals that hold similar positions within the same stations or with different stations or non-public television organizations. Working internally, an interdivisional team is traditionally comprised of members of operational or mid-level management. Sometimes assignment to this type of team is a developmental opportunity for the managers involved, giving them the chance to learn more about the organization and improve their leadership skills. *Example: Georgia Public Broadcasting included every*

employee in at least one interdivisional team to work on key issues in the strategic plan.

Externally this model is often used within public television; for example through the PBS development conferences, development staff members meet regularly to discuss better ways of serving members and raising funds. This approach produces diverse, “outside the box” solutions to difficult challenges; however, the individuals within these teams may not have the authority to implement these solutions quickly. Some challenges require more diverse input; in that case, a cross-functional teams, comprised of individuals from a wide range of positions and/or organizations, can fill the bill. Bringing people of different backgrounds to these teams expands the range of possible solutions, but again the individuals within these teams may not have the authority to implement these solutions quickly. *Example: The 5 Star Networks – a strategic alliance of five southern state networks -- convened a Technology Summit, including representatives of Engineering and Ed Services, to explore opportunities for collaboration in the area of digital conversion, distance learning, and emerging technology.*

Virtual Collaboration

In a virtual collaboration, executive members of two or more stations or networks form a consortium of equal members who draft the mission of the collaboration, and manage or coach the implementation of strategies. Implementation occurs through the creation of staff driven inter-organizational teams (e.g. membership team composed of the membership directors of all stations). However, no new entity is created – whence the “virtuality.” In fact, many virtual collaborations conduct their business electronically, using an Internet web page or e-mail conference to support communication and decision making. A virtual collaboration requires well defined processes and procedures for implementation; members may have difficulty taking advantage of immediate collaborative opportunities due to time needed for decision making. *Example: The 5 Star Networks has initiated a variety of collaborations in the area of joint fundraising, regional underwriting, education services, and regional*

production without creating a new entity. The StarCom conference on PBS Express is a key part of the communications infrastructure supporting this effort.

Agency Collaboration

To take advantage of immediate opportunities, participants can create an agency collaboration. In an agency collaboration, those of authority within the participating stations or networks agree on a mission for the collaboration and then form a separate entity which acts on behalf of the collaboration in day-to-day operations. Members of the collaboration share equity ownership of the new entity. They may form a board of their membership to oversee the agency in a similar fashion as a board of directors of for-profit corporation. Even though this form does help facilitate daily implementation, there is some loss of organizational control and enhanced relationships are not guaranteed. *Example: Infinite Outsource offers a full range of fundraising and member services support to PBS stations throughout the state of Florida – and is planning to expand their market nationwide in the near future. Funded initially by the Future Fund, the new entity has already generated impressive results with its initial direct mail campaigns.*

Cooperative Purchasing Agreements

The cooperative purchase agreement is another form of external collaboration. A membership/cooperative is joint venture of representative stations or networks who join together to improve operations or to make joint purchases. Quite frequently, this type of collaboration is initiated by a vendor or other interested party who would like to create economies of scale by increasing the number of participants in a given program. In this case, the incentive for collaboration is largely financial and participants tend to be extremely focused on the bottom line. *Example: A number of media reps are putting together group buys to offer to prospective national underwriters. Similarly, several direct mail companies offer discounts to customers who participate in shared solicitation programs. Finally, anticipating the conversion to digital, many stations are collaborating with their commercial competitors or local overlap stations to take advantage of needed economies in the purchase and installation of new technology.*

Merger

Occasionally, the best form of collaboration is the legal absorption of one interest by another – sometimes creating a totally new entity, other times marking the end of one entity with its acquisition by the surviving organization. While this is largely a legal undertaking, the process of collaboration can be extremely helpful in facilitating the ongoing operation of the new entity. A collaborative approach can be helpful in resolving duplication of services (for example, human resources, business office, certain operations), cultural issues, and possible downsizing. In today's climate, employees tend to view any form of collaboration as a potential merger or downsizing, so it is very important to manage expectations clearly, fairly, and honestly if a merger is indeed the desired outcome. *Example: Sometimes when public broadcasting stations merge to create state networks, the local stations give up their legal identity to the network while maintaining their local presence and call letters.*

The structural options are endless, and there is no one solution for all situations. In exploring your design for your collaboration, consider the difficulty of the challenge you are addressing and the amount of control you are willing to give up. Generally, the more complex the challenge, the more your structure should facilitate diverse input to address the challenge.

Whichever form of collaboration you choose, remember successful collaboration requires a firm commitment of time and resources. Once you determine who is empowered to make decisions and act on the collaboration's behalf, you must also identify ... and then secure ... the resources and positions needed to maintain the collaboration. During this analysis it is best to determine if these resources can be provided from each organization or out-sourced from external experts.

Step 6. Communicate regularly and effectively with employees, funders, audiences, underwriters, members, and other stakeholders.

As the collaboration develops, communications are key. At every stage, participants must support a procedure that includes a written record of decisions and action items. In that way participants confirm roles, scope of authority, decisions made, and the desire for feedback. They can also use these records as the basis for communicating this information to the sponsors, gatekeepers, and, as an update, to end users.

To help manage conflict and increase the speed of implementation, each member of the working group as well as the coach and sponsor(s) must regard communications as a key part of their assignment. This is especially important in collaborations where the team's actions and decisions have an impact on a large number of individuals who have not worked together in the past ... and, in some cases, who may have a history of hostility and competition. Some collaborations include talking points – suggested messages and updates – in the minutes of each meeting, to help working group members keep others apprised of the progress of the team.

While communication is important, so is confidentiality. Members of the working group must understand that frank discussion is key to progress. The group should establish ground rules for confidentiality, including that what is said in the meeting stays in the meeting, except for items included in talking points; and that if individuals in the meeting feel they cannot live by this rule, they must ask to stop the discussion as soon as they realize there is an issue. That way, the team as a whole or the individuals involved can make an informed decision about whether the confidentiality rule can apply to this particular discussion.

Importantly, in collaborations that involve more than one organization, be sure to agree on a procedure for public announcements and progress reports. Otherwise, collaborators in a conflict situation run the risk of seeing their issues in the media before they have a chance to talk about them in a working session.

To manage conflict, the collaboration must develop and follow an agreed upon well-defined conflict resolution process. For example, the partners should have a well-defined process to allow participants to work out disagreements during meetings, instead of building up this conflict and releasing upon return to your organization. Collaboration is a difficult process, so to make more enjoyable record, reward and communicate successes often. Effective communications can help the collaboration move from individual-to-individual focus to a larger organization-to-organization approach that multiplies the opportunities for positive results.

Even though you have communication processes to ensure participants get needed information, that may not be enough. Collaboration requires the buy-in and commitment of many people, inside and outside the organizations. Every organization has individuals, who can impact or will be impacted by the development of a strategic collaboration, these individual are known as stakeholders. Stakeholders in public television include boards, foundations, key donors, government agencies, staff, etc. Collaborations succeed only when these stakeholders are involved in and buy into the collaboration. To achieve this level of ownership, they must be able to provide feedback and influence the shape of the collaborative. We refer to this as socializing the plan.

Step 7. Implement the plan

Your plan is now like a scale model. Just imagine building a full size home based on your child's doll house, with no planning or testing in between. You can expect similar challenges as you take your scale model plan to full scale. Once the mission/vision and key strategies have been crafted; processes and procedures developed, and the plan properly socialized, then it's time to produce results that cannot be achieved individually. The first hurdle for implementation is the structure: whether the collaboration is a separate entity acting as an agent of the collaboration, staff driven implementation teams, a virtual collaboration or some other creation of your own making, you are certain to encounter challenges as you take the model to scale. Typical hurdles include:

- Limitations imposed by operations, charter or other governance on ability to contract, especially for joint purchases.
- Differences in compensation among stakeholders – for example, in joint underwriting, some reps may be on commission, others may not.
- Differences in opinion about audience expectations – Will they spend more than \$35 for a premium? Will they care about the love life of the snail darter?
- Loss of interest – usually due to an unrealistic expectation of how much time/money/energy the collaboration will actually take – or because the wrong person is on the team
- Conflicting priorities – everyone is very busy and will get around to the collaboration as soon as there's time.

To ensure a successful partnership, this implementation plan must identify the responsible persons, resources needed, timelines for completion and accountability for all steps. As projects get delegated to staff at other levels of the organization, a strong endorsement from top management is also important. Often things change, so it is helpful to develop contingency plans to react to any major changes in the environment. Plans are not static documents etched in stone. Successful plans grow and evolve just like the organizations that crafted them. Growth and evolution comes from periodically stopping action to monitor progress, evaluate, make needed changes and celebrate successes.

Step 8. Ensure continued success .

The best way to ensure continued success of the collaboration is to go public with your celebration. Communicate your goals and successes within your local community and among your key stakeholders. Essentially, conduct a public relations campaign for your collaboration. With the PR campaign begin to involve the community, identify how stakeholders can be more involved and recruit additional partners to help with local implementation.

Also remember, no good thing lasts forever. As you achieve your goals, be sure to evaluate the continued value of the collaboration. Most of the time during evaluation you do not have to actually stop all collaborative efforts; however, as the collaboration evolves from an individual –to-individual effort to the organizations and communities the structure, leadership, roles, and responsibilities may have to be altered to address new challenges. Sometimes, the collaboration may have served its function and continued implementation occurs at each individual organization and community, in this case the formal collaboration may not be needed. No matter what the situation is, participants need to be recognized and rewarded to build on any future activities.

Also, in keeping with our commitment to education and our urgent need to collaborate, public broadcasters have a special obligation to share what they have learned with their colleagues inside and outside the industry. Consider offering workshops and writing articles for the trade. Collaboration is always challenging and the more you can share experiences with others, the more new opportunities and applications you find.

Is collaboration worth it?

Like we said at the beginning, collaboration is a buzzword in today's non-profit environment. The buzz comes from the struggle people have in finding ways to open their minds and hearts to the relationships required for effective collaboration. Change anytime is a challenge. Changing a culture of frontier independence that has served us well throughout the history of public broadcasting is the greatest challenge we face. What do we get in return?

Collaboration can save money because of reduced duplication of services and more efficient use of available resources. In fact, this is the direction of today's technology: digital technology is by its nature collaborative: with its exponential increase in capacity, there's no way a bunch of independents can meet audience needs. The internet and computers give us the ability to collaborate and communicate without leaving our desks. Computers and modern transportation methods have also

influenced the marketing of goods and services, so that collaboration readily yields economies of scale in purchasing and distribution.

Creative production has always been a collaborative process: however, in today's diverse society our members expect a broader range of input and ideas in the programs they support and the services they expect.

Collaboration lowers the cost per thousand for underwriters and increases our ability to leverage state and federal funding through member focused development efforts.

The Elizabethan poet John Donne said long before computers and TV, "No man is an island, sufficient unto himself." In today's public broadcasting environment, he might say: "No one is an island. Therefore, we need to work together to take advantage of our strengths and compensate for our weaknesses

Sidebar #1

Possible Areas for Collaboration for Collaborations in Public Broadcasting

While there are many ways to meet the challenges facing our industry, some particularly lend themselves to collaborative solutions.

Collaborative Fundraising: Even though the Federal scare of 1995 is over, most stations are experiencing the trend of "shrinking dollars" from federal, state and local sources. Most experts agree that this trend will continue. Collaboration provides an opportunity to expand marketing and revenue generation, as well as, the opportunity to reduce costs. More direct and indirect competition, such as the Discover and A&E channels, is building. In facing increased competition, public broadcasters can either fight the battle station by station or 'rally the troops' and present a unified front; collaboration allows you to formally 'rally the troops'.

Digital Conversion: Over the next five years, PBS will undergo its greatest technological challenge: digital conversion. What station has the financial and technical ability to make the conversion on its own? Not many. Collaboration permits shared production, economies of scale, reduced costs and enhance technical training. These benefits can be realized in all areas of technology through collaboration.

Leadership Development: Leadership in public television is going through a major demographic shift, as experienced leaders retire or move to the national scene and new leaders emerge at the local level. The public television workforce is composed of either individuals approaching retirement or individuals with limited leadership experience. Collaborations allow young leaders in organizations to expand their leadership training at a faster pace to more effectively fill a leadership gap in the future.

Sidebar#2

Troubleshooting your collaboration

Here are some common ways collaboration can go awry:

Failing to address built-in conflicts: While getting started, participants can initially focus on positions and not issues. Positions are what individuals at the collaboration desire and issues are real challenges facing the organizations. Often due to already busy schedules and conflicting priorities, it is impossible to manage the logistics associated with collaboration. Without a committed sponsor or outside facilitator, a potentially successful collaboration is halted before it even gets a chance to begin.

Short term thinking: Often during collaborations the sponsors want to dive right into doing without thinking strategically. Even though this is good strategy to produce immediate results, it fails to build the foundation needed to produce long-term, sustainable results. In fact, the damage done by false starts can be permanent. It's better to think before acting and to manage expectations at each step of the process.

Poorly defined people processes: One of the biggest pitfalls is starting a collaboration is to focus purely on the results to produce without regard to improving the relationship. Remember, many of the solutions will require long-term implementation that cannot occur if participant have not formed and nurtured sound relationships. Good ideas and strategies are always created during a collaboration; however, they are often not be properly implemented. We have found this to be the case participants did not invest the time needed to design adequate structures, roles, responsibilities and communications processes. Take the time to build the foundation, you will return your investment may times over. Socializing with stakeholders, not just communicating, is must for continued success. Implementation in a collaboration does not always go as planned because responsibility, accountability, and authority is not assigned to specific action steps. Remember planning is only half the battle.

Table 1: Models for Collaboration

Collaboration Model	Structure	Advantages	Disadvantages
Interdivisional or Cross Functional Teams	Team composed of similar functional or cross- functional staff from all departments or divisions or companies Examples: PBS Development Conferences; CPB Future Fund Panels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse input for difficult problems • Enhanced Team building • Organization-wide solutions • Increased empathy of team members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time commitment of numerous staff • Slow to implement solutions • Lack of accountability or bottom line implications
Virtual Collaboration	Executive members of the participating organizations form a collaboration of equal members to determine vision and strategy, while staff collaborations drive implementation Example: 5-Star Networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very diverse input for difficult problems • Results that could not be produced separately • Reduced competition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires very defined processes for implementation • Slow to react to immediate opportunities • Accountability depends on interests of the executive team
Agency Collaboration	A separate entity is created to act daily on behalf of the collaboration. Members of the collaboration form a board to manage the agency Example: Infinite Outsource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easier to take advantage of immediate opportunities • Results that could not be produced separately • Legal accountability • Reduced competition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of some organizational control • Does not enhance relationships
Cooperative Purchasing Agreement	Organizations or individuals work together to create economies of scale in purchases Example: NETA; TrakMedia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Input and solutions from others • Economies of Scale • Legal accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to produce results that could not be produced individually